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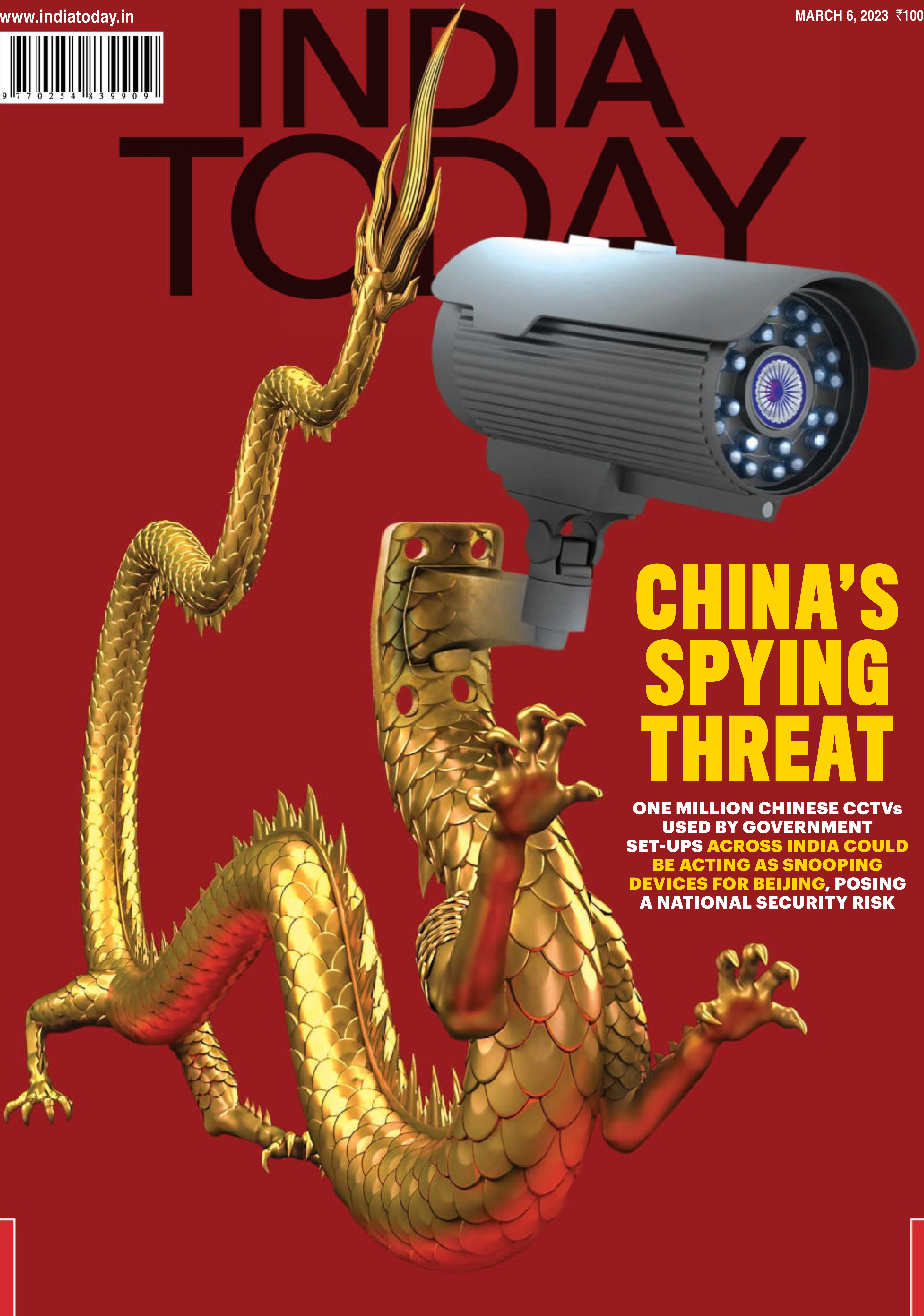

CHINA'S SPYING THREAT

ONE MILLION CHINESE CCTVs USED BY GOVERNMENT SET-UPS ACROSS INDIA COULD BE ACTING AS SNOOPING DEVICES FOR BEIJING, POSING A NATIONAL SECURITY RISK

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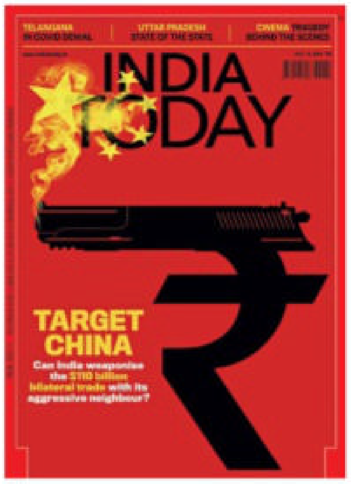
FROM THE
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Spying has probably been going on from time immemorial. Countries spying on each other, governments spying on their citizens, political parties spying on each other and companies spying for industrial secrets. However, with the advent of technology, especially the internet, it is less dependent on human intelligence and more on technical intelligence. Now that we are all so interconnected through our various devices, we are vulnerable to the invasion of our private spaces. Even innocent-looking devices like Alexa know more about you than you ever know. However, the latest public reckoning of spying, which has stirred the government into vigilance, has come from elsewhere.

Late in January, a Chinese 'weather balloon' spotted high over American skies—borne along by high winds all the way from Alaska to South Carolina, at an incredible 60,000 feet—provoked US President Joe Biden to shoot it down. But the object presently spooking India's strategic experts is much closer at hand: the innocuous-looking closed-circuit television camera, or CCTV, the sort that peers at you in an elevator or an ATM kiosk.

Most CCTVs in the world are of Chinese origin. The leading global suppliers are Hikvision and Dahua, two firms partly owned by the Chinese government. Concerns that these could be sneaky espionage tools had prompted an alarmed Washington to push back against Beijing's creeping spy games. The US banned Hikvision, Dahua and Huawei equipment from use in government and critical infrastructure installations in 2019. Last year, the UK followed suit; Australia joined the list last fortnight. The Chinese whispers reached India too after the clash in the icy heights, and we have woken to the fact that CCTV cameras of Chinese make dominate our market—accounting for up to 80 per cent of domestic applications and over *98 per cent* of government installations, including military compounds.


INDIA TODAY
TARGET CHINA
Can India weaponise the $110 billion bilateral trade with its aggressive neighbour?

July 13, 2020

India's strategic establishment, long trained to think in terrestrial terms, may have been slow to wake up to the way the war has been scaled up to a more rarefied level. The threat is not limited to the icy heights of Galwan or Yangtse. The intrusion may be less obvious than boots on the ground, and more abstract than 38,000 sq. km of territory. But the Chinese eye on us is omnipresent, rendered even more inscrutable by the miniaturising magic of the digital age. If the alarmist version of the story is taken at face value, it's not just one eye but all of two million eyes, watching us everywhere, from mundane street corners to high-value defence installations.

About a million stand unblinkingly in government institutions, another million cover India's civic life. Count everything from private bungalows to the 150,000 CCTV cameras on Delhi's streets, to those used on the Delhi Metro or by the SPG, right up to highly sensitive defence sites via Bharat Electronics Limited and DRDO clientship. And as Senior Editor Pradip R. Sagar's cover story this week reveals, an internal note of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) in May 2021 noted grimly that surveillance cameras of Chinese make were installed in all Indian naval establishments.

CCTVs seem to have escaped global strategic attention earlier because of their purportedly innocent nature. The very term 'closed-circuit television camera' conjures up a simplistic vision: an all-seeing eye that never sleeps but the data generated by it flowing only within a tight, restricted loop. What if the circuit were not as closed as everyone imagined? Increasingly, a CCTV is more than just a camera wired to a local area network. Today's Video Surveillance Systems often rely on centrally controlled Network Video Recorders (NVR) for storage, and these work with Internet Protocol cameras, not the old analog ones. Besides offering technically advanced features like higher definition, varifocal or pan-tilt-zoom imaging and onboard video analytics, IP cameras are—as the name suggests—*networked* devices. They are made to receive control data and send visual data. Specifically, they come embedded with a sophisticated integrated circuit called a System-on-Chip (SoC). Again, as the name tells you, this is a whole system—a powerful assembly of functions like the CPU, graphics processor, memory and, more crucially, WiFi or cellular radio modems—all crunched into a chip that can be as small as a shirt button. Modem connectivity means its capabilities can be switched on remotely.

A curious name in the global SoC market is HiSilicon, wholly owned by Huawei, the company that gained notoriety amidst allegations that it served as a cat's paw for Chinese espionage. This led to it being banned from several 5G markets, including India. Established only in 2004, heavy R&D investment propelled HiSilicon to the top of the global game—it found its way even into US-made Honeywell cameras—before a 2020 export control order by the US saw it debarred from access to American chip design software and Taiwan-based "foundries". But a silently ticking HiSilicon chip is in our midst everywhere. Experts had been warning of the spectre of Chinese cyber-snooping in all its forms for well over a decade. But this micro-device has only just been crowned as a likely protagonist in the belated bout of alarm that presently has New Delhi in its grip, with genuine fears about the suspected flow of sensitive military data to Beijing. "You don't need to send spies across the border anymore—these CCTVs become the eyes of any country wanting to do mischief," Lt Gen. Rajesh Pant (retd), the National Cyber Security Coordinator for India's National Security Council, told our team doing the cover story. "They are the best tools for techint [technical intelligence]. The unchecked proliferation of such devices across our country is a serious security risk."

Of course, two million CCTVs cannot be suddenly thrown into the Arabian Sea without throwing our systems totally awry, so what can be a solution? A three-pronged way lies ahead of India. To begin with, a scaling back has begun. The Southern Naval Command is phasing out Hikvision CCTVs. We also need legal barriers against digital spies sneaking in through the backdoor via 'Made in India' partnerships. Simultaneously, cyber experts are combating technology on its own turf, firstly by reprogramming Chinese chips with Indian software. Till such time as India can manufacture its own high-quality CCTVs, testing systems must be installed that can trace the presence of sneaky micro-devices in any foreign equipment, whether of Chinese make or otherwise. Espionage is still all cloak-and-dagger drama, but more with chips and net.

(Aroon Purie)

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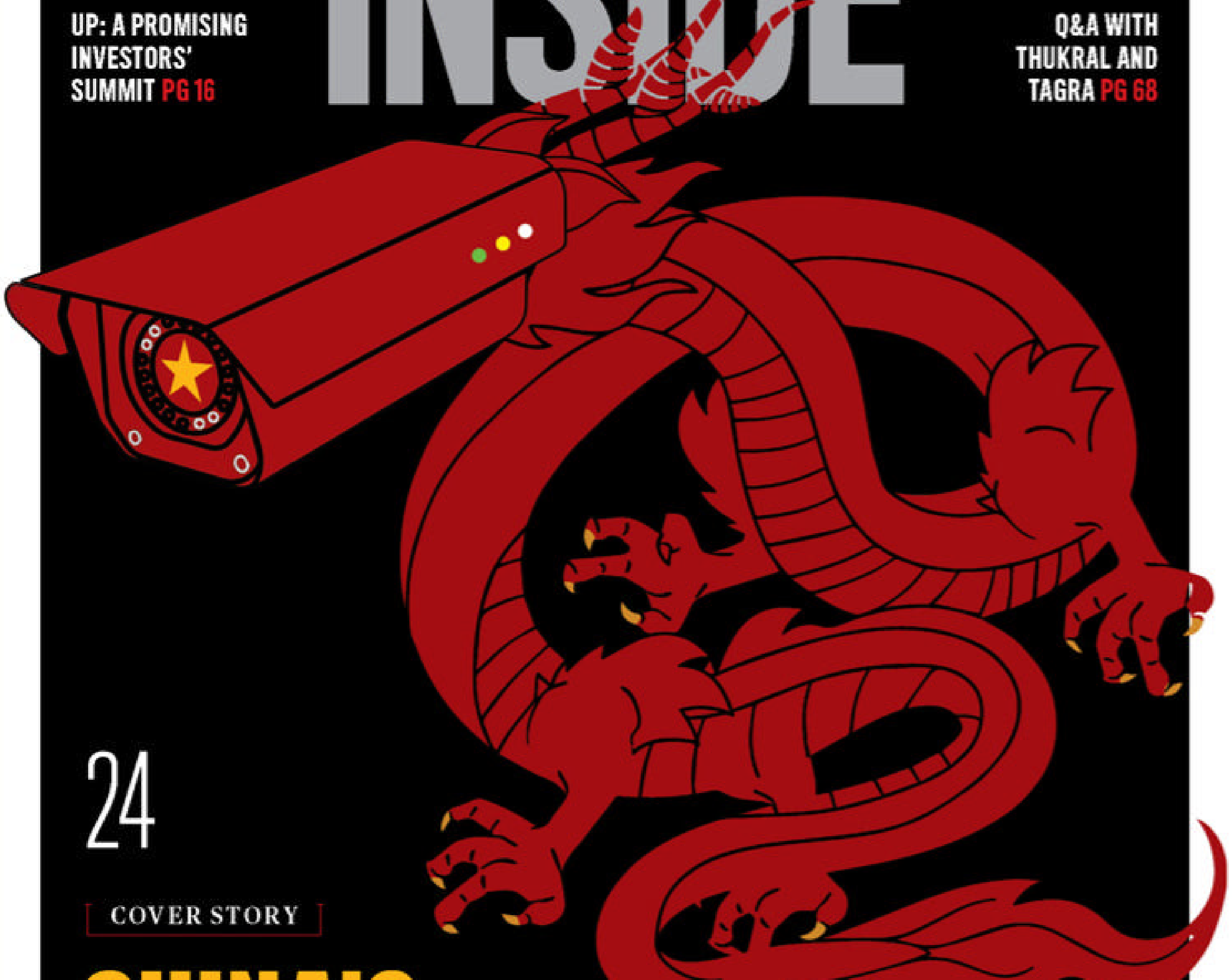

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CHINA'S SPYING THREAT

One million Chinese CCTVs used by government set-ups across India could be acting as snooping devices for Beijing, posing a national security risk

Illustration by **NILANJAN DAS**

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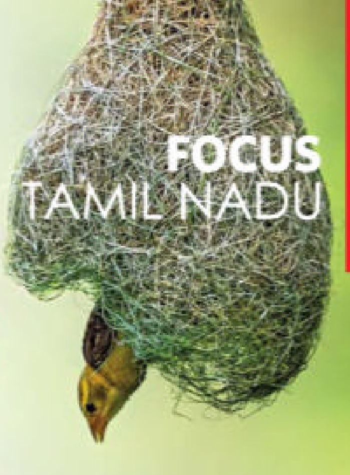

DISCOVERING Tamil Nadu's Wild Side

From the lush forests to its long coastline, Tamil Nadu is brimming with wildlife, making the state a top destination for nature lovers.

Tamil Nadu's rich wildlife owes its existence to several factors. These include a diverse topography, conducive climate and ample vegetation. The varying environs support both dry and moist deciduous forests and the Government of Tamil Nadu has set up several national parks and wildlife and bird sanctuaries across the state to protect its biodiversity. Tamil Nadu's lush and varied habitats range from coastal to hilly, and some are even biodiversity hotspots, supporting an astonishing variety of fauna.

The state is known for the diversity of its mammals, including the tiger, Indian elephant, Nilgiri tahr and lion-tailed macaque. There's a wide variety of tree-dwelling mammals, notable among them being the slender loris. In October 2022, Tamil Nadu notified India's first slender loris sanctuary. The Kadavur Slender Loris Sanctuary is coming up in Karur and Dindigul districts and will cover an area of 11,806 hectares.

Located in the Nilgiris, the Mudumalai National Park is one of India's oldest protected areas and is part of the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve. The park's tropical and subtropical moist broad leaf forests host several important mammals, including tiger, leopard, jungle cat, Indian wild dog, sloth bear, Indian elephant, gaur, and so on. Set in the eponymous mountain range in the Western Ghats in Theni District, Megamalai Wildlife Sanctuary boasts pristine evergreen jungles lying at a height of 1,500 metres above sea level. Home to species like gaur, tiger, leopard, Indian brown mongoose, Indian elephant and Jerdon's palm civet, and birds like Oriental honey buzzard, great pied hornbill and pied thrush, it is a nature lover's delight.

Other noteworthy wildlife areas in Tamil Nadu include Guindy National Park in Chennai, which is one of the few national parks which is set inside a city; the Anaimalai Tiger Reserve, home to several endemic bird species, rare amphibians and reptiles, and hundreds of butterfly species; the Mukurthi National Park near Ooty, which is home to the Nilgiri tahr; and the Kalakkad Mundanthurai Tiger Reserve; which is set in the rainforests of the Western Ghats and is home several important animal species.

On the coastal side, the Gulf of Mannar Marine National Park is a protected area comprising 21 islets and coral reefs in the Gulf of Mannar. Lying off the coast of Tamil Nadu, between Thoothukudi and Dhanushkodi, the park has the dugong as its flagship mammal. There are dolphins and whales as well. Fish include butterfly fish, parrotfish, clown fish, etc. Olive Ridley and Green Turtles can also be spotted here.

Tamil Nadu is also home to several sanctuaries dedicated to birds. Some prominent ones are Pulicat Lake Bird Sanctuary, Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary, Vettangudi Bird Sanctuary, Karikili Bird Sanctuary and Chitrangudi Bird Sanctuary. Apart from resident species, these sanctuaries attract a wide variety of migratory birds in winter, including flamingoes, pelicans and storks.

The state of Tamil Nadu is truly a biodiversity hotspot and a must-visit destination for wildlife enthusiasts.

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DUAL AIM
CM Shinde at a Dussehra rally in Mumbai with a bow and arrow, now his faction's official symbol

MILIND SHELTE

MAHARASHTRA

AFTER THE SHINDIG

By Dhaval Kulkarni

No one really was surprised when the Election Commission of India on February 17 recognised the Eknath Shinde-led faction as the 'real' Shiv Sena and allowed it to retain the party's original symbol—the bow and arrow. Making the blow even heavier, the election body ruled that Uddhav Thackeray could retain the name 'Shiv Sena (Uddhav Balasaheb Thackeray)' only till the two assembly bypolls later this month. Ditto for the 'mashaal' or flaming torch symbol, which the EC had allocated to it on October 10, 2022.

This means that Uddhav, who is left with just 16 of the party's 56 MLAs and six of its 19 Lok Sabha MPs, may have to scout for a new party name and poll symbol, while Shinde, who heads the government in Maharashtra with the support of the BJP, is now in charge of the 'official' Shiv Sena.

In allotting the symbol to Shinde, the EC went by the test of legislative majority, where the Maharashtra CM enjoys clear support of 40 of the 67 MLAs and MLCs, and 13 of the 22 Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha MPs.

As expected, there is uproar in the Uddhav camp over the EC's decision, with the Thackeray scion demanding that the EC be simply scrapped for its bias and Rajya Sabha MP Sanjay Raut alleging the party symbol and name had been "sold" in what he estimates as a Rs 2,000-crore deal. The Uddhav faction has now moved the Supreme Court, which is already hearing a

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SHINDE VS. UDDHAV: HOW THEY STACK UP

PROS

UDDHAV THACKERAY

- Shinde unable to induce a split in party organisation
- Strong grassroots connect in Mumbai, built around old Marathi manoos base, the Thackeray name and uniquely militant cadres
- Can grow beyond old Sena straitjacket with outreach to North Indians, Buddhist Dalits/ Bahujans. Has soft corner among Muslims, Christians who see in him a gentle, cosmopolitan leader willing to crack down on hate crimes
- Perception of being a victim of BJP's vendetta politics

EKNATH SHINDE

- The appeal of an accessible, affable, down-to-earth mass leader risen from the ranks, with a state-wide network, not restricted to his base Thane or Mumbai
- Besides the Shiv Sena name and symbol, has a bulk of the original Shiv Sena legislative party
- The BJP's support
- Mumbai's changing demography, with traditional working-class Maharashtrian areas being gentrified, may work in favour of a pro-Hindutva BJP-Sena alliance

CONS

UDDHAV THACKERAY

- Inaccessible, surrounded by coterie and lacks strong second-rung leadership after the Shinde camp's desertion, due to reluctance to groom and trust leaders with mass base
- Withering away of fear factor under Uddhav's white-collar leadership; fence-sitters could now switch to Shinde side
- Inability to inspire personal or mass loyalty like father Bal Thackeray
- Inherent contradictions of an old Hindutva party in alliance with "secular" parties like Congress, NCP, especially in sensitive regions like Marathwada

EKNATH SHINDE

- Seen more as a loose, fractious federation of MLAs yoked together by opportunism and coercion than as a political party per se; no organisational depth
- Lack of strategic acumen as administrator; overshadowed by deputy CM Devendra Fadnavis
- Growing tensions with BJP. Contradictions in alliance: Sena's working-class Marathi base and nativist politics vs. BJP's mercantile, Gujarati leadership that may prey on Shinde camp to retain Hindutva monopoly
- Perception that there can be no Sena without Thackerays

clutch of petitions on the legality of the change of guard in Maharashtra. They are asking how the EC could give a verdict when the issue is still sub judice.

The EC's decision also comes at a time when the Shinde-BJP government is locked in a prestige fight with the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) in bypolls to the Kasba Peth and Chinchwad assembly seats, where the Congress and NCP, respectively, are up against an incumbent BJP on behalf of the MVA. Both are in the Pune belt, where the Sena's traditional Mumbai footprint has a spillover, especially in Kasba Peth, which is within the city.

But that's tangential to the Uddhav camp's trauma upon losing its name and symbol—inseparable from the Sena's first family for decades. It was Uddhav's grandfather, the activist 'Prabodhankar' Keshav Sitaram Thackeray, who suggested the organisation's name. The 'dhanushyabaan' was allocated to the party in 1989, and has strong resonance among the Mumbai voter. In regions like Marathwada, where religious cleavages run deep, it is a barely-veiled dare to the voter—'*Khan havaa, ka baan havaa* (Do you want Muslims to win or the bow-and-arrow)?' Now, Shinde, who claims to represent the true legacy of Sena supremo Bal Thackeray, is walking away with both, leaving Uddhav and his son Aaditya to begin from scratch.

There is jubilation in the Shinde camp. "The EC's decision will have a positive impact on the outcome of the battle over the Shiv Sena legacy. Fence-sitters and those in doubt will now cross over to our side," says a former Lok Sabha MP, who is now with the Shinde camp. Another Lok Sabha MP, who is on the same side, agrees. "When it comes to actual election contests, the party symbol has a strong loyalty and recall value, especially in regions like Marathwada. People blindly vote for the bow and arrow regardless of who the candidate is, which may actually lead to some of Uddhavji's men coming over to us. These developments may also increase his reliance on the Congress and NCP, which in turn, may affect his faction's appeal in regions that have a history of communal tensions."

So, is all lost for Uddhav and his remaining loyalists? Perhaps not. While Shinde may have the support of the bulk of the legislative wing and now recognition as the official Shiv Sena, the party organisation has by and large stayed loyal to the Thackerays. This is especially true in its stronghold of Mumbai, where its politics was born.

Uddhav also retains most of the Sena's network of *shakhas* (branches) in Mumbai. Many of these *shakhas* and the party headquarters—Shiv Sena Bhavan at Dadar—are controlled by the Shri Shivai Seva Trust, which is headed by Thackeray family loyalist and former minister Subhash Desai. Party mouthpieces *Saamana*, *Dopahar Ka Saamana* and *Marmik* are managed by Prabodhan Prakashan. Shinde will not find it easy to wrest control of these tangible and intangible assets.

He also lacks organisational muscle beyond bastion Thane. There are also reports of growing factionalism within his party. The delay in cabinet expansion and the possibility of having to yield more to senior ally BJP is also causing unease among legislators who crossed over for ministerial berths. Old Sena cadre also say the sense of being under siege has led to party workers and core voters closing ranks with the Thackerays. "We gained sympathy when our government was toppled," says a source in the Thackeray camp. "It had been dissipating. The EC decision has revived the sentiment."

A veteran Sainik from central Mumbai cites another fact the Thackeray camp can take heart from. "This is not the first time a party has lost its symbol," he says. "It had happened to the Congress under Indira too. Besides voter and cadre sympathy, our USP is the Thackeray legacy... In India, people support personalities, not ideologies." And Shinde, he believes, just does not have Uddhav's stature. They believe the residuary party has enough steam in it, especially in India's financial capital.

Mumbai's politics is polarised along linguistic lines, between Marathi and non-Marathi speakers—while not a majority, the former are its largest minority. And though no caste, religious or linguistic group votes as a monolith, old Sena loyalties still move the Maharashtrian working class. Its ground-level *shakha* connect also extends to non-Marathi zones: Gujaratis, Jains, Marwaris and South Indians, besides Muslims and Christians. Uddhav's test will lie in whether he can blend his softer, cosmopolitan instincts with the Sena's old nativist credo, widening his catchment area without harming the core. Also, that inherent contradiction applies perhaps more starkly to the Shinde-BJP alliance. The latter's base lies largely among Jains, Gujaratis, Marwaris and North Indians—all have fraught ties with old Sena voters. None of this diminishes the huge task before the Uddhav camp. If the EC allocates them a new name and symbol, they will have to first popularise it—even so, voters might press the old symbol by force of habit. "Overall, we have no option but to fight a legal battle and reach out to voters," says the veteran leader.

UDDHAV WILL NOW HAVE TO APPROACH COURTS AND TAP INTO THE WAVE OF SYMPATHY FOR HIM

And while Uddhav may enjoy some popular sympathy at present, a senior Congress leader says it's still up to him to tap into this sentiment and encash it by hitting the ground running. Senior journalist Nikhil Wagle, too, says Uddhav's future depends on how he translates sentiment into votes. His gentle, white-collar leadership did see many of the Sena's rough edges being smoothed out, but Uddhav may have to return to the rough-and-ready, muscular street politics the party was once known for. He may also have to groom grassroots leaders and those with a mass base, shedding the high command mode.

And therein lies the rub. As a close Shinde aide notes, Bal Thackeray doted on his Sainiks, and elicited a strong sense of personal loyalty. Uddhav has yet to build the same sense of personal loyalty around him. After all, it was he who had personally groomed Shinde and many of his fellow rebels, men who finally walked out on him. ■

RANJAN RAHI

BIHAR

THE KUSHWAHA CAPER

By Amitabh Srivastava

The week after Valentine's Day came the news of a breakup in Bihar. Upendra Kushwaha, self-appointed younger brother of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, quit the primary membership of the Janata Dal (United)—which he had joined only in March 2021—to float his own Rashtriya Lok Janata Dal (RLJD) and is dropping broad hints on the possibility of joining hands with the BJP-led NDA, which Nitish had left in August 2022. Though the Lok Sabha election is more than a year away, this marks one more turning point in Bihar's intense political flux. Given ambitious movers and shakers like Nitish and Kushwaha, the pre-electoral cauldron has already started bubbling in the state.

If Nitish on February 18 urged the Congress to immediately initiate dialogue with potential partners for a proposed anti-BJP political front, Kushwaha switched gears two days later to leave the JD(U). While he himself did not reveal all his cards at his press conference in Patna, the Bihar BJP let the cat out of the bag, when its spokesman Nikhil Anand tweeted within hours of Kushwaha's presser to declare “Upendraji a socialist with greater ideological-moral values”. Ironical words those, for the parting of ways leaves a jarring note in the long history of socialist politics of Bihar. If Nitish is seen as the tallest leader of Bihar’s Luv-Kush bloc—the numerically significant Kurmis and Koeris (Kushwahas) in the state—Kushwaha, too, has laid claim to the same base, with less success.

When Nitish overturned 15 years of Lalu raj by decisively defeating the Rashtriya Janata Dal in 2005, much of his electoral success then was attributed to his seemingly unshakable base of Kurmi-Koeri voters with the Extremely Backward Castes grafted on top.

Since then, he has only consolidated his sway over those social blocs. Kushwaha, on the other hand, had a dream run in 2014 when his erstwhile party, the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP), won all the three seats it contested in the Lok Sabha election as a BJP ally. But his personal base was proved to be shaky when he suffered a rout in the 2019 general election, which he contested as part of the RJD-led grand alliance, as well as the 2020 assembly polls, for which he allied with BSP and AIMIM. His party had to forfeit deposits in 94 out of the 99 seats it contested, losing all. That may not matter to the BJP, which was left friendless after Nitish’s abrupt departure less than a year ago. Since then, it has won over Chirag Paswan, who brings a 5-6 per cent Paswan vote to the saffron kitty. “The BJP will be fine if Kushwaha comes on board and adds another 3 per cent votes,” says a senior BJP leader in Bihar.

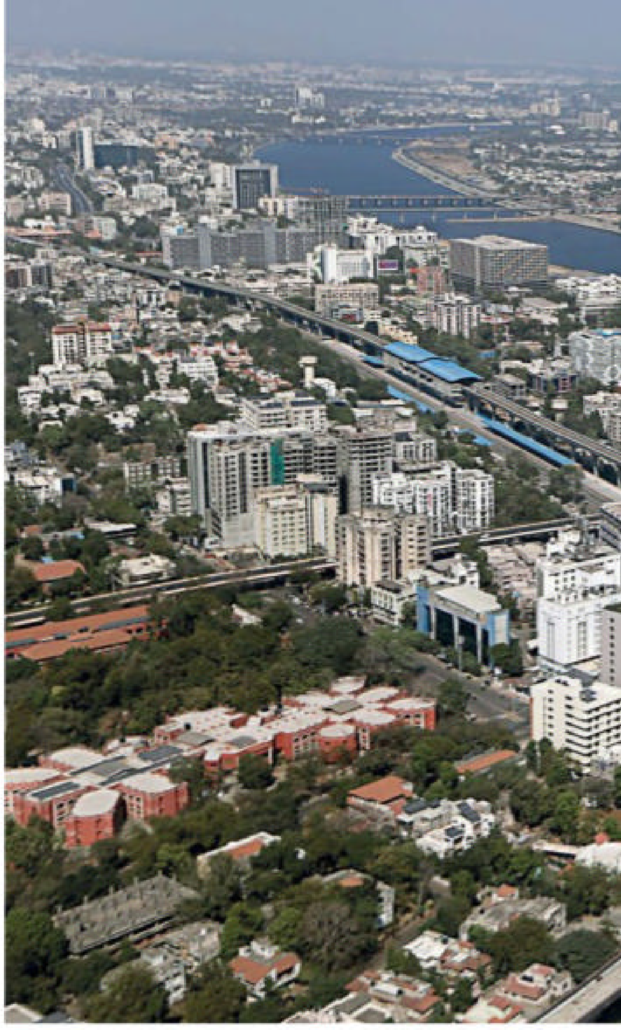
KUSHWAHA LOST HOPE WHEN NITISH STARTED PROJECTING TEJASHWI AND NOT HIM AS THE FUTURE LEADER OF BIHAR

Alliances will be crucial in Bihar, and Nitish and the RJD are well aware that they stand a firmer chance against the BJP’s mighty electoral machine if they stay together and manage to restrict the election to a bipolar contest. For, the BJP gains when there is a triangular contest in the state, as was the case in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, when Nitish and Lalu contested separately and the saffron party swept the polls. This was the election in which Kushwaha’s RLSP won three Lok Sabha seats in alliance with the BJP, earning him a berth in the Union cabinet in the first Modi-led government. This explains Nitish’s eagerness to keep the Congress on the same page to ensure a minimum division of the secular vote in Bihar in the 2024 election. The BJP, too, is gathering allies. Chirag is already in, and they are evidently willing to forgive Kushwaha’s past flip-flops—he had quit the NDA to join hands with Tejashwi Yadav on the eve of the 2019 Lok Sabha election.

Though the NDA may find it impossible to replicate its 2019 success—when it won 39 out of Bihar’s 40 Lok Sabha seats—the BJP is keen that it does not fall too far behind. The political equation has changed drastically since then, with Nitish’s JD(U)—which had won 16 out of the 17 seats it contested in 2019—now firmly in the opposition camp. Kushwaha will, therefore, come in useful, as he stakes a claim to Nitish’s legacy, vote bank as well as socialist ideology.

Incidentally, this is Kushwaha’s third separation from Nitish, his first political mentor. Though Kushwaha was elected to the Bihar assembly for the first time in 2000, Nitish made him leader of the opposition in March 2004. Kushwaha, however, lost the assembly polls in February and October 2005 and left the JD(U) to join the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in 2006. He returned to the JD(U) before 2010 and was rewarded with a Rajya Sabha seat. He quit both the JD(U) and the RS seat in 2013, joining the BJP-led NDA a year later and becoming Union minister. That particular dalliance came to an end in December 2018 when Kushwaha quit the NDA to join the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)-led grand alliance. A rout in the 2019 general election, and Kushwaha exited the grand alliance too.

He came back full circle to the JD(U) in March 2021—by merging his RLSP with Nitish’s party. It was seen as a well-planned strategy to consolidate and strengthen the combined Kurmi and Kushwaha vote. Things soured soon after, however, when Nitish joined the mahagathbandhan and started projecting Tejashwi Yadav as the future leader of Bihar. Kushwaha, 63, found this difficult to stomach as he had for long fancied himself as Nitish’s successor. The final straw was Nitish declaring the RJD scion and his deputy CM as the leader of the grand alliance for the 2025 Bihar assembly election. Hence Kushwaha’s third departure from the JD(U). Is it for good? In politics, you never can say. ■



GUJARAT

A RUDE

By Jumana Shah

On February 4, a piece of news hit Gujarat’s real estate developers like a tonne of bricks. The state government announced that it was doubling the circle rates relating to property, known as *jantri* rates locally, with immediate effect. Also called the Annual Statement of Rates (ASR), it’s the minimum benchmark rate at which any property or land transaction can take place in the state. It determines the actual stamp duty paid to the government on every transaction at the mandated 6 per cent. All transactions beginning February 6 were to be done per the new *jantri* rates. Though realtors had loosely anticipated the revision—it was last done 12 years ago—the suddenness and magnitude of it shocked big and small players alike.

“It was a bolt from the blue,” says developer Vijay Shah, who has been in the industry for close to four decades, adding that this kind of rate hike has never taken place before. CREDAI (Confed-

BUILDING BLOCKS
An aerial view of Ahmedabad's Paldi area, Nov. 2022

NANDAN DAVE

REALTY SHOCK

eration of Real Estate Developers' Association), Gujarat, stated that 50,000 ongoing deals will be affected. It also contested the standard hike of 100 per cent across the state, calling it inappropriate, as land rates in rural areas may not have appreciated as much as in the urban areas, and people may end up paying higher than the market rate. "Revision of *jantri* rates is an ongoing exercise to be done periodically, from twice a year to once every two years. For reasons that are anybody's guess, this revision had not happened for 12 years. But every time, the revision has been a consultative process with a lead time of a few months," Shah says.

The following week was a busy one for Chief Minister Bhupendra Patel—a real estate developer himself in his constituency Ghatlodia in Ahmedabad till a year and a half ago, when he was first appointed CM. He almost constantly met industry representatives, who demanded a 50 per cent rollback and deferment of the implementation to May 1. A slight reprieve came via a February 11 announcement that the new *jantri* rates will start applying only from April 15, but the statewide doubling of rates was to remain. While the industry heaved a momentary sigh of relief, powerful builders rushed straight back to their offices from the CMO to push through the registration of pending deals.

"In the past 12 years, there has been a significant increase in the market value of immovable properties. The revision of *jantri* rates was necessary to give citizens the due market value of their properties," superintendent of stamps Jenu Devan says. But that precisely was the problem. Typically, revisions are done in small measures periodically, not effected via one drastic hike, that too across the board.

"The revision usually follows a scientific survey, done regularly by the talatis' and collectors' offices. For the survey, the talatis consider an average value of the deals done in the area in six months or so and arrive at the new *jantri* rate. This time, the survey is being done now and we are told there will be another revision in a few months, when the rates in some areas will be revised upwards. But the present announced rate won't be cut," Shah says.

On the government's side, the reason for the abrupt announcement is believed to be two-pronged. First, to reduce black money circulation in the market. Gujarat is notorious for having the highest 'cash component' in every realty deal. The market rate of a property is quoted at levels much higher than the *jantri* rate, and the difference, to varying degrees, is demanded by the developer in cash. "The bulk of the players in Gujarat are small-time builders, making it an unorganised market; 90 per cent of transactions happen above *jantri* rates. No GST is paid on cash transactions," says Rocky Israni, MD of Pacifica Companies.

Another reason was to raise stamp duty, an important source of revenue for the government. According to official data, from 2021 to 2022, property registration in the state has increased by 11 per cent and revenue from stamp duty by 19 per cent, from Rs 7,337 crore to Rs 8,769 crore. A key BJP promise in its manifesto ahead of the 2022 assembly election was to increase the size of the economy to $1 trillion (Rs 81.6 lakh crore)—a four-fold jump from the current Rs 19.4 lakh crore.

DOUBLING DOWN

On February 4, the state government effected a 100 per cent hike in* jantri*, or the minimum benchmark rate for property/ land transactions

- Developers say the decision will affect 50,000 deals, calling the uniform 100 per cent hike across the state inappropriate
- After protests by developers, the government deferred the implementation to April 15, keeping the statewide doubling of rates unchanged
- Through the decision, the government wants to reduce the black money circulation in the market besides raising its revenue through stamp duty
- The decision will affect middle-income buyers, typically dependent on a home loan, as well as the developers
- Property tax will also double instantly, further pinching the middle class

Raising the circle rate is considered a decisive step in that direction.

In the immediate term, the decision will be detrimental to middle-income group buyers, those typically dependent on home loans, who will have to shell out significantly more on stamp duty. For developers, their expense on 'buying' Floor Space Index (FSI)—the maximum permitted floor area on which they can build on any given piece of land, calculated on the *jantri* rate—has doubled. They will naturally pass on the additional cost to the buyer. The deferment in implementation has helped realtors close FSI purchase formalities for already announced projects, but hundreds of thousands of deals will still be affected.

The worst impacted, however, will be the redevelopment projects. "Developers reach a consensus with various stakeholders after a lot of negotiations. This kind of revision throws all calculations out of the window and brings them back to the drawing board," Shah says.

THE *JANTRI* RATE HIKE WILL WEIGH HEAVY ON MIDDLE CLASS BUYERS, WHO WILL HAVE TO PAY HIGHER STAMP DUTY

Property tax calculated on the basis of *jantri* rates will also double instantly, further hurting the middle class. However, once the dust settles, a section of the developers claim this will be a good move in the long run. "It will initiate a much-needed shake-out of the unorganised fringe players in the Gujarat market. GST and RERA's burden of compliance on developers along with increased *jantri* will bring a semblance of maturity in the industry over time," Israni says. Adjusted for inflation, doubling the rate across the state is also justified, he adds. Call it a developing story. ■

ABB
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DS AUTOMOBILES

TELANGANA

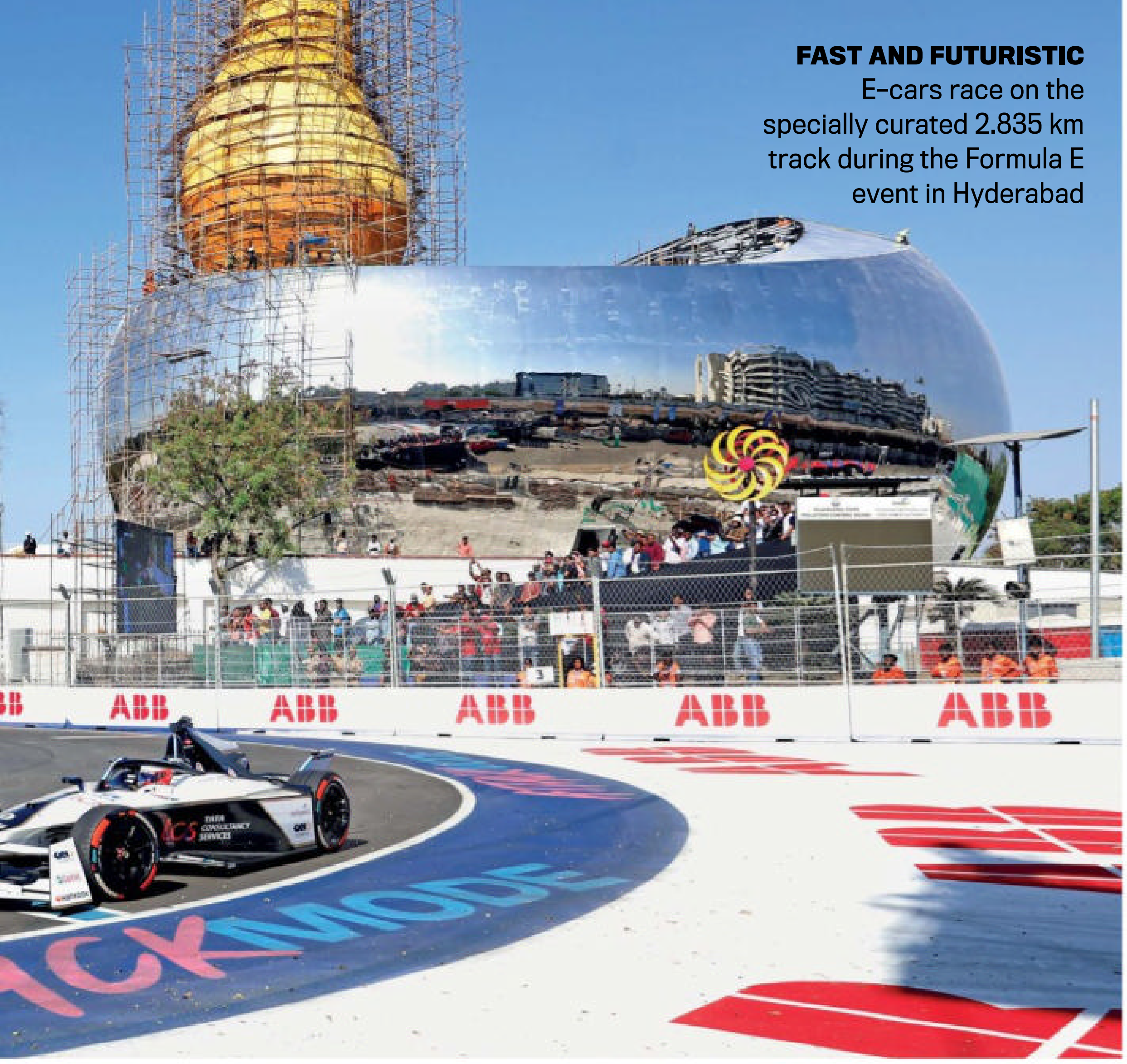
ELECTING TO GO ELECTRIC

By Amarnath K. Menon

Indian cities may otherwise be earning notoriety on world pollution indices, but Hyderabad seems to be racing towards a cleaner future. On February 11, after hosting the first-ever Formula E race in India—also the first on a street circuit—Telangana's capital is poised to earn a place at the global electric vehicle (EV) high table. That all 20,000 tickets were sold out for the inaugural event of the electric equivalent of Formula 1 is testimony to the growing popularity here of motorsport as well as green mobility.

In 2022, every 20th vehicle registered in the country was an EV, with more than one million of them sold in India. The Union and state governments have launched several initiatives to expedite EV adoption. A NITI Aayog report says that by 2030, some 80 per cent of two- and three-wheelers, 40 per cent of buses, and 30-70 per cent of cars in India will be EVs.

Latching on to this trend swiftly, Telangana is determined to make the most of it. "We are committed to providing an impetus to EV adoption and aim to be the most electrified state in electric mobility," said industries, information technology and urban administration minister K.T. Rama Rao, who pulled out all the stops to get the Formula E race to Hyderabad—to be an annual event. The state is vigorously pursuing a comprehensive strategy to manufacture various components of the EV ecosystem such as cell and cell components and battery charging and swapping stations, and two-wheeler, three-wheeler and buses, as also taking



FAST AND FUTURISTIC E-cars race on the specially curated 2.835 km track during the Formula E event in Hyderabad

AP

steps towards refining lithium.

Developing a policy for e-mobility is crucial to Telangana's attractiveness as an investment destination for the EV sector. The state is already home to several EV players and intends to leverage its strengths in the automotive, electronics, aerospace, defence and information technology sectors to create synergies and become a centre for research and innovation in EV, battery technologies and other emerging tech such as autonomous and connected vehicles. At present, the lack of charging infrastructure, along with the higher costs of the vehicles, range anxiety and innovation in battery storage capacity are among the major hurdles.

Telangana's Electric Vehicle and Energy Storage Systems Policy 2020-2030 intends to achieve a substantial reduction in the total cost of transportation for personal and commercial purposes, building on the foundation laid down by the central government's Faster Adoption and Manufacturing of Hybrid and Electrical Vehicles (FAME) II scheme. The policy aims to attract private investments worth $4 billion in the EV sector and create employment for 120,000 people by 2030. In the past two years, about 45,000 electric two-wheelers, 5,000 cars and 3,000 three-wheelers have been sold in Telangana. A fleet of 40 electric buses plies through five different routes connecting the airport with the city.

Telangana is home to leading Indian and global EV companies such as Mahindra & Mahindra (M&M), Olectra, ZF, Mytrah, Gravton, Hyundai Mobis, One Moto and Pure EV. Citroen, Quantum Energy and Hop Electric are new EV offerings. M&M, the first Indian automobile maker to develop an e-race car (Mahindra XUV 400 EV), is investing Rs 1,000 crore in expanding its facility at Zaheerabad to make electric three- and four-wheelers. "Last-mile mobility is growing fastest in the EV space and so we are rapidly setting up capacity to accelerate the growth of sustainable mobility in the country," says Rajesh Jejurikar, executive director (auto and farm), M&M. It is collaborating with the state government in laying the roadmap for the development of EVs and energy storage systems manufacturing units. Zaheerabad is one of the four mega EV manufacturing clusters being developed by the state.

Amara Raja Batteries Ltd (ARBL) will put Rs 9,500 crore in a lithium-ion battery manufacturing giga corridor to catalyse the evolution of a comprehensive EV and advanced chemistry cell ecosystem. The Andhra Pradesh-based battery-maker will set up an advanced energy and research centre—Amara Raja E-Hub—near the airport and other facilities at Divitapally in Mahabubnagar district. "The e-hub will have advanced laboratories and testing infrastructure for material research and prototyping not just for ARBL needs but also for other players in the energy and mobility ecosystem," says Jayadev Galla, industrialist-politician and CMD.

To improve awareness of the advantages of going electric, the Telangana government has conducted multiple road shows, EV expos and conferences. The state has also set aggressive targets in clean energy production, which complement the EV charging infrastructure. The role of the Telangana State Renewable Energy Development Corporation, a nodal agency for implementing EV infrastructure, will be crucial: it's setting up 1,000 EV charging stations across the state under the PPP model.

India's first new mobility-focused cluster, Telangana Mobility Valley (TMV), was announced at the first edition of Mobility Next Hyderabad Summit—part of the Hyderabad E-Mobility Week (February 5-11). TMV aims to attract investments of around Rs 50,000 crore and generate over 400,000 jobs in the next five years. "With zero or ultra-low tailpipe emissions of pollutants, e–mobility proves to be a big stepping stone for India's vision to reach net–zero carbon emission by 2070," said Jayesh Ranjan, principal secretary, Industries and Commerce and Information Technology, Telangana. India is gradually vrooming towards an EV revolution, with Telangana at the wheel. ■

AN E-MOBILITY POLICY IS CRUCIAL TO TELANGANA'S ATTRACTIVENESS FOR THE EV SECTOR PLAYERS

ANI

MADHYA PRADESH

AZAD FACTOR

By Rahul Noronha

Chandrashekhar Azad of the Bhim Army certainly understands the power of optics. On February 12, he organised a massive rally in Bhopal, which was attended by OBC, Dalit and tribal groups, and announced that his Azad Samaj Party (ASP) will contest all 230 seats in Madhya Pradesh and elect a chief minister and deputy CMs from marginalised groups if it won. The rally was held ostensibly as a show of strength against an anti-reservation meet organised by the Karni Sena Parivar in Bhopal in January, in which it had slammed the BJP for continuing with caste-based reservations.

With assembly polls in the state just months away, Azad wants to build a coalition of backward, SC and ST communities. In doing so, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), which projects itself as the main voice of marginalised groups in the state, remains its key challenger. On the other hand, things have turned tricky for both Congress and the BJP. While the Karni Sena rally made the Congress happy, Azad's rally in Bhopal delighted the BJP as it threatened to pull away the Congress's traditional vote bank.

However, will Azad's entry really matter? His performance in the Uttar Pradesh polls did not match up to his media popularity. To have any bargaining power in MP, he'll have to win the support of both SCs and STs, who together account for 37 per cent of the state's population. "Organising a rally is one thing, contesting elections another," says state BSP chief Ramakant Pippal. Political analysts, too, aren't very excited. "Any leader from outside MP won't be able to impact the election unless he or she has been working in the state for a long time. Such shows of strength are meant to bargain with mainstream parties," says poll analyst Girija Shankar.

Azad's rally, thus, is a grand gesture, but whether it can spark any real shift depends on the groundwork the ASP manages to put in ahead of the polls. ■

KERALA

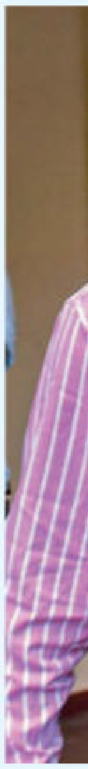
A LIFE MISSION GONE WRONG

By Jeemon Jacob

It was an unceremonious exit with no fanfare or mentions of his contributions to the service. M. Sivasankar, who was principal secretary to Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan during his first term, retired from service on January 31. On February 14, he was taken into custody by the Enforcement Directorate (ED)—his third arrest since the scam about alleged gold smuggling via diplomatic baggage broke in 2020. This time, it was over allegations that he had received kickbacks in one of the government's Life Mission scheme projects, where low-cost houses were to be built for the 2018 flood victims.

The arrest comes in the wake of new revelations by former UAE consulate worker Swapna Suresh, one of the prime accused in the gold smuggling case. Based on the interrogation of Sivasankar and Swapna's auditor Venugopal, ED sources say C.M. Raveendran, the current additional private secretary to the CM, will get a call next.

The case is built on allegations surrounding a Life Mission project in Wadakkanchery in Thrissur district for 140 low-cost houses with a Rs 18.5 crore grant from international agency Red Crescent Authority via the UAE consulate. The ED filed an affidavit in the Ernakulam district sessions court on February 19 alleging money laundering and saying Sivasankar was not cooperating. Incidentally, the ED case is based on an FIR by investigating agency Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) from back in 2019. The CBI's complaint then was that Red Crescent, a subsidiary of the International Red



PTI

WEST BENGAL

SMOKE RINGS IN SAGA

By Romita Datta

The impending byelection in the Sagardighi assembly seat in West Bengal's Murshidabad district on February 27 is the latest platform on which the ruling Trinamool Congress and the principal opposition party BJP are facing off, with no one losing the chance to treat it as a crystal ball through which to gaze at the 2024 general election. Subrata Saha of the TMC, whose death in December 2022 necessitated the bypoll, had won the seat with a margin of over 50,000 votes in the 2021 assembly election. But it can be a closer fight for the TMC this time around—its candidate Debashish Banerjee faces not just the BJP's Dilip Saha, but the Congress-appointed, Left-backed *beedi* magnate Byron Biswas, owner of Jeet Beedi Manufacturing Company, as 30 companies of central forces keep vigil. The results will be declared on March 2.

BARS CODE Sivasankar in ED custody

Cross, was a foreign entity and had violated the Foreign Contribution Regulation Act (FCRA) when, in 2019, it transferred 10 million UAE dirhams (about Rs 22.5 crore at the current exchange rate) that had been donated by the consulate to the Kerala government for the Life Mission project. This was after the Centre denied Kerala's request that it be allowed to accept funds from foreign governments to rebuild the state after the floods. The ED chargesheet now alleges that Unitac Builders, which was awarded the housing contract, paid some Rs 4.48 crore in bribes to Sivasankar and Swapna to bag the project.

SIVASANKAR'S ARREST IN THE 'LIFE MISSION' CASE HAS ALREADY STALLED A PROJECT WHICH IS CLOSE TO CM PINARAYI'S HEART

Sivasankar had a sterling career till he was arrested by the National Investigation Agency (NIA) in the gold smuggling case and jailed for 98 days. The media uproar over his involvement with the 42-year-old Swapna, and the leaking of WhatsApp chats linking them to the state government became a huge source of embarrassment for CM Pinarayi in 2020. But despite a high-voltage campaign by the opposition targeting the CM, Pinarayi led the Left Democratic Front to a consecutive win in the 2021 assembly poll, and that too with a thumping majority.

Now the case has come back to bite the government. "The records and statements suggest that there were irregularities in awarding the projects. We have to ascertain more facts...," a senior ED official told INDIA TODAY. The agency has already grilled U.V. Jose, ex-CEO of the Life Mission project. The chargesheet mentions six people, including Sivasankar.

A senior government official, though, feels the ED is still fishing and may not have much of a case. "The ED's claims are based on social media chats between Swapna and Raveendran, which were leaked to the media. But the chats do not reveal any substantial evidence against him. He has previously given statements to agencies investigating the case on two occasions," says the official.

The CM is aware of the consequences if ED arrests his close aide, Raveendran. As it is, the investigation has stalled progress on the Life Mission project, one that is close to Pinarayi's heart and has given him the maximum mileage as a CM. The question is, will it now seed the beginning of his downfall? ■

RDIGHI

PLAYING HIS HAND
TMC leader Abhishek Banerjee at a rally in Sagardighi, Feb 19

Murshidabad is home to 25 per cent of India's *beedi* workers, and the industry dominates its economy. Sagardighi falls under the Jangipur parliamentary constituency and the TMC Lok Sabha MP there, Khalilur Rahman, owns a *beedi* company too. Sagardighi has 236,000 voters—most local women earn a living by rolling *beedi*, over 90 per cent of the men have migrated elsewhere for work. For 1,000 pieces of *beedi* rolled, the women earn a paltry Rs 178. Despite such poor wages, workers vote for owners as they feel a *beedi* industrialist as an elected representative could solve their problems. Migrant labourers on the electoral rolls are now being urged to return to cast their votes.

To counter Biswas's clout, TMC national general secretary Abhishek Banerjee has talked about raising wages of *beedi* workers to Rs 220-225. The opposition Left is unimpressed. CPI(M) Murshidabad district secretary Jamir Mollah cites the government's earlier announcement of Rs 268 as the minimum wage for *beedi* workers. "Abhishek is actually bringing the wages further down. The TMC-affiliated unions act in tandem with owners to keep wages low," says Mollah.

Meanwhile, with 66.27 per cent of Murshidabad's population being Muslim, the TMC is stoking fears of the National Register of Citizens (NRC) to consolidate the minority votebank, which is undecided in the face of the various corruption scandals, like the alleged teachers' recruitment scam, that have hit the TMC. At a rally in Sagardighi on February 19, Abhishek accused the Congress, Left and BJP of uniting to defeat the TMC. He also displayed a photograph of BJP leader Suvendu Adhikari with Biswas to prove his point. "A vote for Congress is a vote to lotus... it means strengthening the hands of the BJP to implement the NRC," he said.

TMC candidate Debashish Banerjee, a distant cousin of Mamata's, was expelled from the party in 2021 for allegedly supporting a BJP candidate after being denied a ticket. A youth TMC leader, he has made a comeback with Abhishek's blessings. Mamata herself was in favour of Subrata Saha's son, a teacher with a clean image. Saha's supporters are now livid. Though the opposition seems to be united in castigating the TMC, the ruling party is hoping for a split in votes between the Congress-Left combine and BJP. ■

UTTAR PRADESH

HIGH INTENT

With a promise of investments worth Rs 33.5 lakh crore at the Global Investors Summit this month, Uttar Pradesh is poised to become an attractive destination for investors

By **PRASHANT SRIVASTAVA**

The Uttar Pradesh Global Investors Summit 2023 has kindled hopes of large-scale industrialisation in Uttar Pradesh, with the government receiving investment proposals worth Rs 33.5 lakh crore—nearly eight times higher than Rs 4.68 lakh crore worth of MoUs signed during the first such summit in 2018. The event has been a vindication for Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who returned to power last year with the promise of turning Uttar Pradesh into "Uttam Pradesh".

While asserting that UP is a safe destination for investments, the chief minister, at the three-day summit in Lucknow from February 10-12, said that unlike earlier when only a few regions around the National Capital Region benefitted, the current proposals covered all the state's 75 districts. He also claimed these investments will lead to the creation of 9.38 million jobs in the state. The investment commitments UP has received are higher than what has come to Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Rajasthan and other states that have organised similar summits.

The Yogi government is aiming for a trillion-dollar economy by 2027, to which end it approved the new Uttar Pradesh Industrial Investment and Employment Promotion Policy, 2022, along with amendments to the UP Start-up Policy, 2020, and the UP Data Centre Policy, 2021, in November. The new policies had incorporated suggestions from different stakeholders. With corporates now buying into the promise of UP, the future can only look brighter. ■

GLOBAL INVESTORS SUMMIT 2023

THEY CAME, THEY SAW, THEY PROMISED

₹33.5 LAKH CR.	19,058	9.38 MILLION
Total proposed investment	No. of MoUs signed	Estimated employment generation

REGIONAL RISE

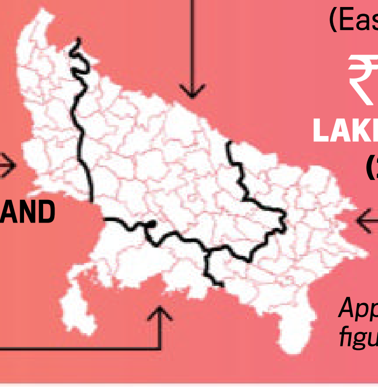
The investment proposals have sought to address regional disparities

MADHYANCHAL (Central UP)
₹4.3 LAKH CR. (13%)

PASCHIMANCHAL (West UP)
₹14.8 LAKH CR. (45%)

POORVANCHAL (East UP)
₹9.5 LAKH CR. (29%)

BUNDELKHAND
₹4.3 LAKH CR. (13%)



Approx. figures

GROWTH DRIVERS
Prime Minister Narendra Modi and CM Yogi Adityanath at the UP Global Investors Summit

TOP INVESTORS

🟡 MoUs ⚪ Promised investment

TAUSCHEN INTERNATIONAL LTD, HONG KONG

Sectors: Manufacturing, electronics, skill development, textiles, EV, medical devices

🟡 **16** ⚪ **₹1.89 lakh cr.**

RG STRATEGIES GROUP, INDIA

Sectors: Renewable energy, EV, electronics, manufacturing

🟡 **7** ⚪ **₹1.73 lakh cr.**

IMPERIA INNOVATION INVESTMENT

(Austin Consulting Group, USA)

Sector: Education infrastructure

🟡 **2** ⚪ **₹1.05 lakh cr.**

CAUSIS GROUP

Sector: EV

🟡 **1** ⚪ **₹1 lakh cr.**

RELIANCE INDUSTRIES

Sector: Telecom infrastructure

🟡 **1** ⚪ **₹75,000 cr.**

TOP SECTORS

Investment promises

RENEWABLE ENERGY
₹4.47 lakh cr., 15.5%

ELECTRONICS MANUFACTURING
₹3.58 lakh cr., 12.4%

INDUSTRIAL PARKS
₹3.28 lakh cr., 11.3%

HIGHER EDUCATION
₹2.57 lakh cr., 9%

MANUFACTURING
₹2 lakh cr., 6.8%

LOGISTICS & WAREHOUSING
₹1.59 lakh cr., 5.5%

REAL ESTATE
₹1.24 lakh cr., 4.3%

IT-ENABLED SERVICES
₹1.12 lakh cr., 3.9%

TOURISM
₹98,000 cr., 3.4%

(Figures in percentage are share of total intent)

INVESTORS SUMMIT 2018

A STOCKTAKING

The UP government has started preparing for the first ground-breaking ceremony of the Global Investors Summit that happened this month, but there is still little clarity on how many of the investment proposals from the 2018 summit have turned into projects on the ground. "We will give the break-up soon," industrial development minister Nand Gopal Nandi tells INDIA TODAY. *Of the total investment proposals worth Rs 4.68 lakh crore received in 2018, only projects worth Rs 2.09 lakh crore (around 50 per cent) have had their ground-breaking ceremonies, claim top government officials. Nandi, however, pegs the worth of projects at over Rs 3 lakh crore. "The rest will be completed in the next few months," he adds. Sources in the government blame the uneven progress on loopholes in "filing procedures". This is despite an easier project clearance system now in place and CM Yogi's order to local officials to coordinate with industrialists.*

₹4.68 LAKH CR.

The amount of investment promised at the UP Investors Summit, 2018

796,312

No. of jobs generated

Source: UP government

₹2.09 LAKH CR.

Estimated worth of projects facilitated through three ground-breaking ceremonies

PROJECTS FACILITATED

July 29, 2018	**81**	(₹61,800 cr.)
July 28, 2019	**290**	(₹67,000 cr.)
June 3, 2022	**1,406**	(₹80,000 cr.)

UP GLOBAL INVESTORS SUMMIT
NEW INDIA'S GROWTH ENGINE
10-12 FEBRUARY, 2023 LUCKNOW
UP GLOBAL TRADE SHOW
10 to 14 FEB
2023

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

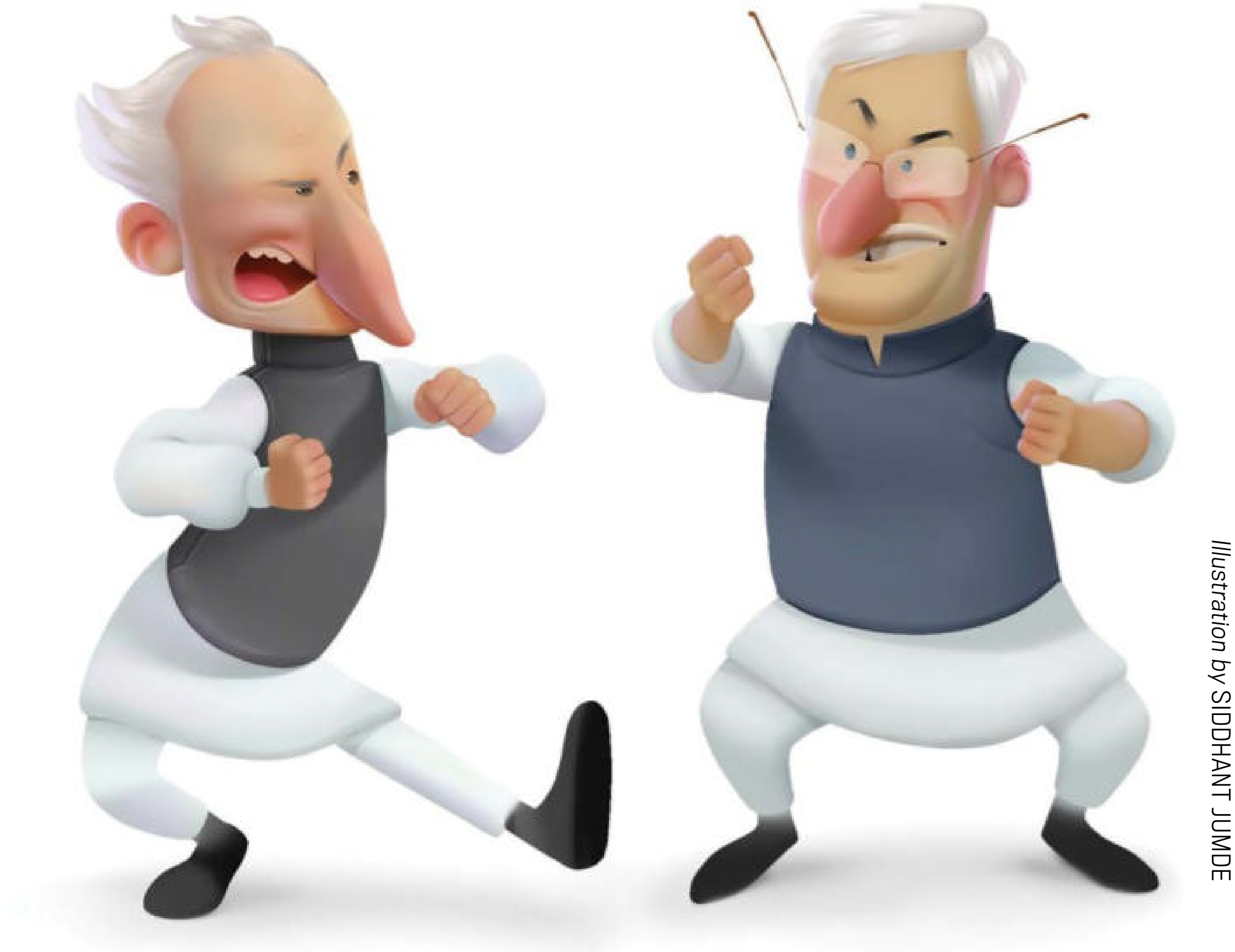


Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

WAR OF THE VETERANS

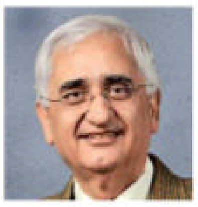
The tussle between Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot and Union minister and BJP leader Gajendra Singh Shekhawat has been getting uglier every day. Shekhawat has taken Gehlot's government to task on law and order and the budget. Gehlot has state agencies investigating allegations of Shekhawat's role in a cooperative society fund scam and in the attempt to topple his government in 2020, but there has been little headway. Recently, at a rally in Jodhpur, the hometown of both leaders, Gehlot said the Centre had raised Shekhawat's security cover so that the agencies could not arrest him. Shekhawat retorted that it was news to him that people with security cover could not be arrested. On Shekhawat's FIR in Delhi against the illegal tapping of his phone, the Delhi police interrogated Gehlot's OSD Lokesh Sharma for the third time in February.

Stalin's Spanner

Bharat Rashtra Samithi chief and Telangana chief minister **K. Chandrashekar Rao's** grand ambition to become prime minister by forging a pan-India electoral alliance opposed to the BJP but without the Congress has stumbled at an unexpected juncture. Tamil Nadu chief minister and DMK president M.K. Stalin has asked KCR to serve the people of his own state, betraying his reluctance to back the BRS in the 2024 general election. He has called for support for an anti-BJP front at the national level that includes the Congress. But KCR, egged on by soothsayers, is charting his own course.

ANI

WHO MOVES FIRST?



This one's for a political love guru to resolve. At the 11th general convention of the CPI(M) in Patna on February 18, when Bihar chief minister **Nitish Kumar** appealed to the Congress to make a move in uniting the Opposition, Congress leader **Salman Khurshid** expressed a peculiar dilemma. Nitish said BJP could be restricted to 100 seats in 2024 if the Congress initiated a dialogue with the potential constituents of the proposed anti-BJP alliance. While Khurshid assured Nitish his party was on the same page as him, he said: "*Kabhi Kabhi pyaar mein ek samasya hoti hai, ki pehle kaun kahega* 'I love you' (sometimes the problem in love is who says 'I love you' first)."

No Power Hunger Here

A few weeks ago, Gujarat chief minister Bhupendra Patel started the practice of switching off all fans, air conditioners and lights when the office was not in use. On odd occasions, he would switch off the lights himself before leaving. Ministers and their secretaries mocked the move, pointing to the practice of cooling cars and cabins of bureaucrats beforehand so that the space would be comfortable by the time they arrived. Interestingly, though, when the tattle reached the CM, rather than retort, he went about the task as usual. Inspired (or shamed?), at least a few senior bureaucrats have started doing the same.

WANING MAGIC

It was 'Khela Hobe' all over again as **Mamata Banerjee's** West Bengal took on Saurashtra, the home turf of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Union home minister Amit Shah, at Kolkata's Eden Gardens in the final of the Ranji Trophy match. Bengal's sports and youth affairs minister Manoj Tiwary led the state team from the front, convinced that Bengal would replicate the rout on the 22 yards that Didi had accomplished in the political field. As luck would have it, Bengal lost the match. Has *khela hobe* run its course then as a motivating slogan?

Kaushik Deka with Rohit Parihar, Amarnath K. Menon, Jumana Shah, Amitabh Srivastava and Romita Datta

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Global Investors Summit 2023
March 3 - 4, Visakhapatnam
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ANDHRA PRADESH IS MARCHING TOWARDS A LONG AND SUSTAINABLE GROWTH PATH

Andhra Pradesh, currently, is in fast-forward mode of growth. It is endowed with abundant natural resources and a lengthy coastline of 974 km which is the second longest in the Country. The state has achieved remarkable progress in the industrial sector. Nearly 3.5 million mobile phones are produced in the state each month, and the state has the potential to manufacture 3 million TVs annually. Going forward, the state is looking to invite manufacturers in advanced sectors such as semiconductors, batteries, and power storage.

Sri. Y. S. Jagan Mohan Reddy
Hon'ble Chief Minister
Government of Andhra Pradesh

With the aim of achieving these ambitious goals, the honourable Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, Shri YS Jagan Mohan Reddy, and his key ministers have been engaging with leading private sector companies and global conglomerates through investor meets across India. This drive will culminate in the "Global Investors Summit 2023" on March 3rd and 4th at Visakhapatnam.

Andhra Pradesh is India's gateway to the southeast with its 974 km long coastline. It has also emerged as the fastest-growing state in India, as per the number released so far, with double-digit growth of 11.43% in 2021-22. The state has embarked on a rapid growth path under the able leadership of Shri Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy, its honourable Chief Minister. Thanks to the governance reforms and formulation of investor-friendly policies by the government, the state has emerged on top in terms of ease of doing business for three consecutive years since 2019, particularly significant since this survey was based on stakeholders' feedback. This was achieved by reengineering five acts under labour laws and repealing 26 obsolete acts administered by revenues and other departments besides other investor and industry friendly initiatives. With this effective overhaul of the administrative processes average time to start a business is reduced to 21 days.

During the curtain raiser event on January 31, 2023, the Honorable Chief Minister YS Jagan Mohan Reddy said, "We are here to provide you a platform, an experience that shall be unlike any other that you have come across. The Honorable Prime Minister has shown us the way in taking India to newer heights and, within India, Andhra Pradesh is an exciting geography—the fastest growing state with 11.43% growth rate, with unparalleled offerings in terms of Ease of Doing Business, where we have been consistently ranked first for three consecutive years, in terms of stakeholder feedback, with a 974 km coastline, the state has a competitive logistics advantage of access to six ports, and there are four more that are coming up."

Aerospace & Defence | Agri & Food Processing | Automobile & Electric Vehicles | Electronics & IT | Healthcare & Medical Equipment | Industrial & Logistics Infrastructure | MSME and Startups & Innovation | Petroleum & Petrochemicals | Pharmaceuticals & Life Sciences | Renewable Energy | Skill Development & Education | Textiles & Apparel | Tourism & Hospitality

Sri Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy
Hon'ble Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh
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Speaking at the same event Honorable Minister for Industries & Commerce, Infrastructure & Investment, Information Technology, Gudivada Amarnath said, "The Andhra Pradesh Global Investors Summit 2023, will showcase the strength of Andhra Pradesh as an unparalleled business destination, with a plethora of opportunities across sectors. More importantly, the partner nations, the business delegations, and the Captains of the Industry coming together shall form an eclectic learning platform for us. This shall take the state to newer heights."

> **The state has identified 13 sectors with high growth potential in the long run. These include Aerospace, Defence, Agri and Food Processing, Automobiles including EVs, Electronics, IT, Healthcare& Medical Equipment, Logistics, MSME, Start-ups, Petroleum, Pharma, renewable energy, Textiles, Tourism and Hospitality.**

Consistent improvement in the governance framework to create hassle-free investing is augmented by the creation of hard infrastructure. The government is looking to harness the benefits of its vast coastline by developing 4 new ports in addition to the 6 existing ones. Three out of the 11 industrial corridors are coming up in Andhra Pradesh. Viz., Visakhapatnam – Chennai, Chennai – Bengaluru and Hyderabad – Bengaluru industrial corridor.

The state also has around 534 Industrial Estates equipped with best-in-class infrastructures. These allow industries to set up new facilities in minimum time. Over 18,000 units operating in these industrial estates have invested around Rs.50,000 Cr so far. The state offers a land bank of around 46,500 acres with industrial zoning leading to a significant de-risking of the projects by avoiding delays.

YSR Jagananna Mega Industrial Hub is being developed over an extent of 6,739 acres along the Visakhapatnam – Chennai corridor. AP Bulk-Drug Park coming up with the financial assistance of the union government is one of the only three such parks approved. The central government will be investing Rs1,000 Cr in the project. Over Rs 1 lakh Cr investment is envisaged in port-led industrialisation projects. With the development of six in-land waterways and nine fishing harbours the state intends to offer sea connectivity every 50 km to harness the full potential of the country's second-largest coastline.

In the aerospace and defense manufacturing sector, Andhra Pradesh is formulating enabling policies that will boost the already vibrant ecosystem. The state already has several key establishments such as DRDO, Bharat Electronics Ltd, Bharat Dynamics Ltd, and National Atomic Research Laboratory (NARL). Building on this strong foundation the state is developing a dedicated Aerospace & Defence Park in the Anantapur district to support large-scale manufacturing in this sector. Public sector BEL is setting up Defence Systems Integration Complex for Weapons and Radars in Anantapur and New Generation Electro-optics & Advance Night Vision Cameras in Krishna District. DRDO has planned a Missile Testing facility in Krishna District while an air cargo complex and world-class MRO facility are coming up near Visakhapatnam. The state is likely to attract more public and private sector players in this sector due to its natural advantage in the form of Heavy Mineral Beach Sand a source for minerals such as Ilmenite and metal-grade Titanium, key to Aerospace & Defence manufacturing products.

Agriculture remains the biggest employer in the state and the rapid growth rate and downstream development of the food processing sector throw up many opportunities. The state has multiple food parks including mega food parks and SEZs catering to the food processing sector. Thanks to the modernisation the GVA of the Agriculture & Allied Sector for the year 2021-22 is estimated to be Rs 2 Lakh Cr., with a growth rate of 11.27%.

Aerospace & Defence | **Agri & Food Processing** | **Automobile & Electric Vehicles** | **Electronics & IT** | **Healthcare & Medical Equipment** | **Industrial & Logistics Infrastructure** |

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> **The state ranks first in India in aquaculture accounting for 24% of the nation's fish production, second in the production of paddy, maize and groundnut and fourth in milk and meat production. Over ten thousand YSR RythuBharosaKendras have been developed by the government to boost the industry.**

They serve as the "One Stop Shops" for a variety of agricultural and related services as the last mile touch points at village levels. The state has been ranked first in the total value of trade conducted on the e-National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) in FY 2019–20 thanks to government facilitation and technology deployment. At the same time, there have been constant efforts to increase agricultural value addition through food processing units that significantly increase farmers' income. As a result, Andhra was ranked first in registered food processing units during the annual Survey of Industries 2019–20.

Andhra Pradesh is home to a number of leading automobile and ancillaries like tyres and battery manufacturers. The auto ancillary sector in the state has made a mark in global markets with exports to more than 30 countries. The state is now focussing on growing the sector with a focus on electric vehicles and clean mobility including advanced hydrogen fuel cell technology.

The state also offers opportunities for the development of clean mobility infrastructure like battery charging and swapping stations. The government is looking to set up 1 Lakh slow and fast charging stations with 100 DC public charging stations by 2024. Taking a lead in the adoption of clean fuel, the plan is afoot to convert all the APSRTC buses and all government vehicles into electric vehicles in a time-bound manner. A few cities such as Visakhapatnam, Vijayawada, Amaravati, and Tirupati have been shortlisted as Model Electric Mobility cities with an intent to convert 100% of all commercial & logistic fleets to electric fleets by 2029.

The IT sector has been a key driver in the growth of Bengaluru and Hyderabad. The state of Andhra Pradesh sees a relative advantage over the entrenched neighbouring states now. The state is developing three IT concept cities at Visakhapatnam, Tirupati, and Anantapur that offer 20–25% lower operating costs to the companies. There is hope that both domestic and global IT companies looking to set up new facilities will choose Andhra, in particular the beach city of Visakhapatnam. The availability of skilled labour, a crucial factor for the IT business puts Andhra on a strong footing. The state is placed seventh in India's Skills Report 2022 for Employability. There are 346 engineering/MCA colleges, over 18 state-sponsored universities, and elite institutions like IIT, IISER, IIIT, and IIM in the state. A high-end IT skills university being built by the state in Visakhapatnam will concentrate on educating top talent in the fields of AI, ML, Data Analytics, and other cutting-edge technologies.

The state has implemented a futuristic IT Policy providing fiscal incentives to IT companies. State aid is granted towards Employment Incentives, Power tariffs, Transport subsidies, Work from Home incentives, Quality Certification, and Start-up ecosystem development.

Additionally, the state is swiftly rising to prominence as a desirable site for electronics producers. Andhra Pradesh is the only state in India that houses four officially designated clusters for electronic manufacturing, (EMCs). With a project cost of more than Rs750 crores, more than 500 acres of YSR EMC is being constructed.

This cluster is looking to host some of the leading businesses in PCB fabrication, large-scale OSATs, display fabs, and mega semiconductor fabs. The cluster is likely to attract an investment of Rs 10,000 Cr or $1.2bn within the electronics sector and will generate employment for about 25,000 people.

Healthcare and Medical Equipment sector in Andhra Pradesh displays prudent support to both government and private infrastructure. Dr. YSR Aarogyasri Scheme provides universal health coverage through a network of 10,032 Dr YSR Village Health clinics, 1,142 Primary Health Centres, 117 Community Health Centres, 53 Area Hospitals, 12 District Hospitals, and 11 Teaching hospitals. Whereas private healthcare providers are encouraged to take lead at 16 health hubs being developed to provide state-of-the-art facilities. There is an equal focus on developing the ecosystem for manufacturing medical devices in the state. Andhra Pradesh

Additionally, the state is swiftly rising to prominence as a desirable site for electronics producers. Andhra Pradesh is the only state in India that houses four officially designated clusters for electronic manufacturing, (EMCs). With a project cost of more than Rs750 crores, more than 500 acres of YSR EMC is being constructed.

Ranked No.1 in EoDB

No.1 rank in Ease of Doing Business consecutively for the last 3 years, particularly significant since this survey is based on stakeholders' feedback

Double-Digit Growth

11.43% GSDP Growth rate in 2021-22, the highest in the country as per the numbers released so far

Robust Maritime Infrastructure

974 km of Coastline which is 2nd longest in the country with 6 Existing Ports & 4 Upcoming Ports. India's Gateway to South-East Asia

Conducive Business Environment

Industry Centric Policies, with a proactive Government steering the State. 3 out of 11 industrial corridors in the country are coming up in Andhra Pradesh alone

Awards & Accolades

- LEADS (logistics) Award, 2022
- Enertia Award, 2022 (Energy)
- ET Award in Port Led Infrastructure Projects, 2022

Abundant Resources

- Land Bank of 48,000 acres
- Treasure house for 48 Minerals
- Abundant Water
- Uninterrupted Power
- Skilled Work Force
- 6 Airports
- 10 Sea ports (including 4 upcoming)

MedTech Zone (AMTZ) is India's first manufacturing hub for medical devices.

The Government has allotted Rs16,000 Cr or $2bn, to the Nadu Nedu program for revamping the healthcare infrastructure in the state. State is establishing 17 new medical colleges, with at least one in each parliament constituency of the State and 16 Multi-Specialty hospitals under the Health Hub Scheme. With 3.72 crore Health IDs and 3.93. Cr Electronic Health Records, Andhra Pradesh is leading amongst all states in the rollout of the Ayushman Bharat Digital Mission.

MSMEs are a backbone of Andhra's industrial ecosystem across industries. YSR Navodayam scheme offered a one-time Restructuring of MSME loans of 1.78 lakhs units to help them tide over the pandemic-related crunch. For further nurturing of the MSME sector, YSR JaganannaBaduguVikasam Policy has been launched. YSR Cheyutha and YSR Aasara schemes have been designed to support women entrepreneurs. The state has set a target of grounding 100 clusters in the next 2 years, out of which 52 clusters are proposed to be established during the FY 2022-23.

> **The 640 square kilometers of petrochemical and petroleum investment region (PCPIR), makes Andhra a globally competitive investment destination. The state's three major ports, Vishakhapatnam, Gangavaram, and Kakinada, are all equipped with pipeline infrastructure for the provision of liquid feedstock and the processing of liquid cargo, making it the perfect place to import feedstock from places like the Middle East, Asia Pacific, and East Asia.**

With more than 5,100 MSMEs operating in a variety of sub-sectors such as Organic and Inorganic Chemicals, Plastics, Specialty Chemicals, Industrial Gases, Agrochemicals, and Fertilizers, the industry has already attracted investments totaling $2.4 bn in a short span of time.

Andhra Pradesh's Chemicals & Petrochemicals industry has immense potential, with India's largest offshore fields present in the KG basin of the state. These fields extend over 28,000 sq. km on land, 24,000 sq. km in shallow waters offshore, and 18,000 sq. km in deep waters, with recoverable reserves of 698 Million Metric tonnes of oil equivalent. The crude oil production in the KG Basin is around 19,190 barrels per day, while natural gas production is approximately 9.8 Million Metric Standard Cubic Metre per day.

The State is home to more than 250 APIs/Bulk Drug units 38 of which are approved by the WHO and 20 are approved by the USFDA. The pharmaceutical sector in Andhra Pradesh has a significant contribution to India's exports. The sector has attracted over Rs 18,000 Cr in investments as of FY 21-22, generating about 88,984 direct employment. There are key pharma clusters in the state including Jawaharlal Nehru Pharma City, APSEZ Atchutapuram, APSEZ Pydibhimavaram, and APSEZ Naidupeta. The state has been ensuring a consistent supply of manpower to the sector with 154 undergraduate and 124 post-graduate universities & colleges running courses on pharma, bio-medical, and biotechnology across the state.

The state offers enticing opportunities for renewable energy investment. According to estimations, the State has the capacity to install 38 GW of solar and 44 GW of wind energy. In the State of Andhra Pradesh, a third of the total installed capacity comes from renewable energy sources. The nine GW of installed renewable power capacity consists of 4.1 GW of wind power and 4.3 GW of solar power. In addition, the state has equipped local governments to recycle garbage and produce electricity from biomass, municipal solid waste, and industrial waste.

The government of Andhra Pradesh has developed a portfolio of 7 projects with a total estimated capacity of 17,800 MW for the installation of solar, wind, and solar-wind hybrid power plants. A total of 29 areas with a 33.2 GW potential for pumped hydro storage power projects have been identified in the state. The state wants to build the largest "Integrated Renewable Energy Storage Project" in the world, with a 4,230 MW installed capacity and a 10 GWh storage capacity.

The state government has proposed 175 Skill hubs with a target to reach all legislative assembly constituencies. This program will have an annual training capacity of 51,000 candidates. This will augment the current Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) program in the state comprising 84 Industrial Training Institutes that enroll 12,000 students annually, and 82 Government Polytechnic colleges that enroll 13000 students annually.

Andhra Pradesh enjoys a significant advantage in the textiles sector thanks to the availability of abundant raw materials in the state. The state figures among the largest producers of cotton, it is the second-largest producer of raw silk and the fourth largest in Jute production in India. The state is focused on developing segments in short supply such as Processing, garments, and Technical textiles. Special emphasis is accorded to Agro & Medical textiles & also Textile Machinery Manufacturing. A dedicated Medical Textiles Manufacturing facility in AP Med Tech park is being set up. The state is developing 30 Handloom Clusters that will help about 2 Lakh Weavers across 983 Co-operative Societies.

Andhra Pradesh is the third most popular tourist destination for domestic travelers attracting 14% of national footfalls. Andhra Pradesh reported 93.2 million domestic tourist visits in the year 2021 out of which around a third visited Tirumala. The state has accorded 'Industry' status to Mega Tourism Projects and 5-star and other similar large projects. Steps are being taken to Promote theme-based tourism such as Heritage Tourism, Buddhist tourism, Eco-tourism, Rural tourism, etc.

The upcoming "Global Investors Summit 2023" is likely to attract significant commitments from domestic and foreign investors. The resource rich state of Andhra Pradesh is meticulously charting a long and sustainable growth path for many decades to come. A combination of physical and human infrastructure coupled with reformist and responsive government has opened up opportunities for potential investors across 13 key sectors. The transition from abundance to prosperity has been set in motion.

INDIA TODAY CONCLAVE 20

THE INDIA MOMENT

MARCH 17TH & 18TH, 2023
NEW DELHI

SHASHI THAROOR
Congress Leader

On Ambedkar, ideas of India. And why only winning elections doesn't equal a democracy.

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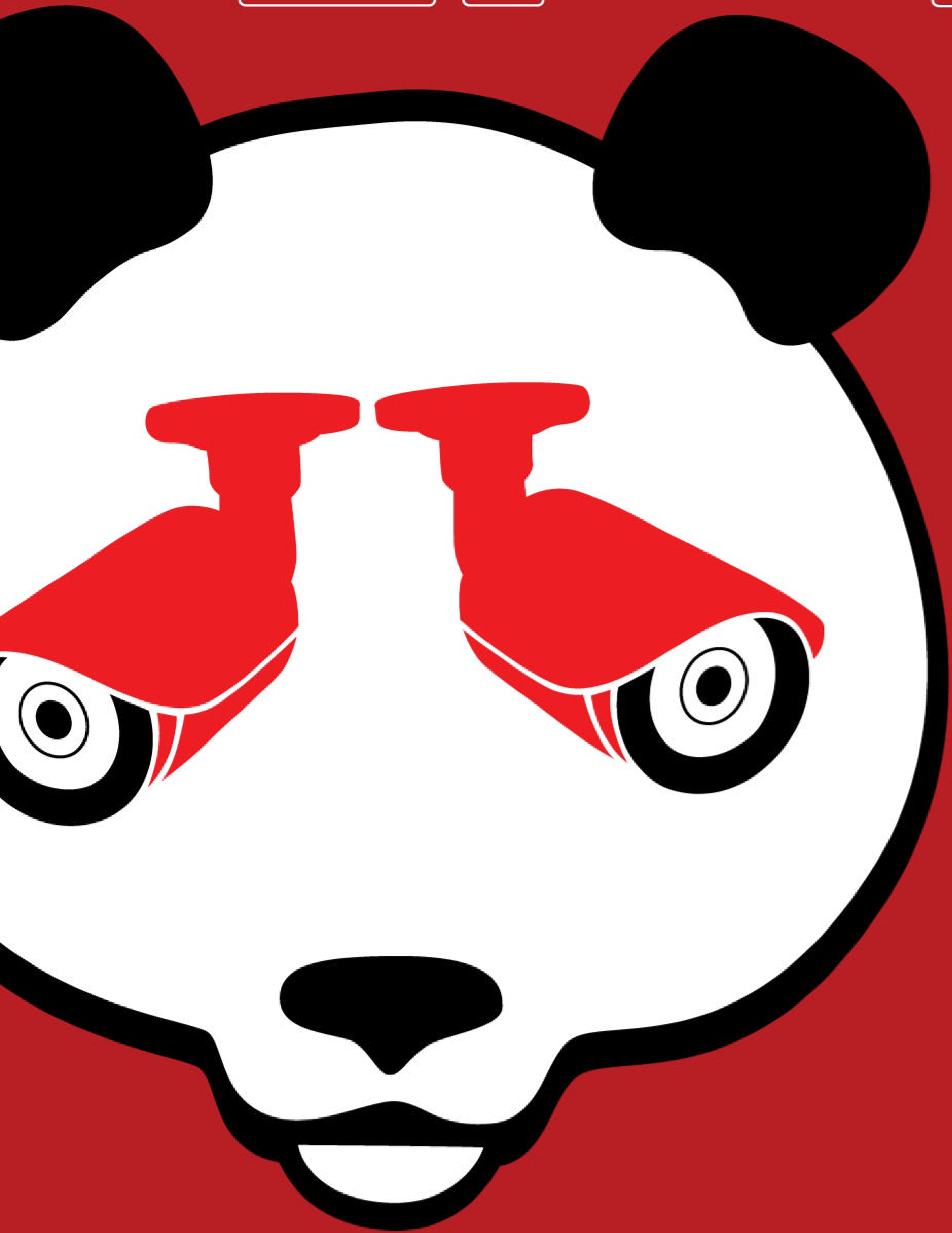
BESPOKE PARTNER
DA MILANO
ITALIA

THE CHINA SNOOPING MENACE

CHINESE-MADE CCTVs ACROSS INDIA COULD WELL BE ACTING AS THE EYES AND EARS OF BEIJING. EXPERTS RAISE CONCERNS OF NATIONAL SECURITY, BUT EXISTING LAWS AND AWARENESS ARE INADEQUATE TO DEAL WITH THE THREAT

By **PRADIP R. SAGAR**
Illustrations by **NILANJAN DAS**

WHILE INDIAN AND CHINESE GENERALS WERE engaged in serious talks to end the worst military stand-off in 50 years between the two countries at the Line of Actual Control (LAC) in Ladakh in 2020-21, Beijing was suspected to have been playing a double game with New Delhi. In August 2021, almost 15 months after the bloody clash between troops that resulted in scores of deaths, cyber groups linked with the Chinese government were reported to have been engaged in a massive cyber-espionage operation. The intent was to target seven major electricity load dispatch centres (ELDCs) near the LAC in Ladakh to disrupt power supply to the region at



will. The Indian government was aware of these attacks, which included a cyber-strike to disable the country's national emergency response systems, and took pre-emptive action to thwart these groups successfully.

The Indian government did not confirm these cyber attacks till April 2022, when the US-based cyber security firm Recorded Future gave out details of the attack. The firm surmised that Internet Protocol (IP) cameras, often used in Close Circuit Television (CCTV) networks, and internet-operated Digital Video Recording (DVR) devices were compromised in the operation by the Chinese. The operation, they said, was an effort to collect information about India's power infrastructure. Soon after, the Centre confirmed that Indian power plants near the LAC were indeed a target, with Union power minister R.K. Singh saying that two Chinese hacking attempts on electricity distribution centres in Ladakh in 2021 were repelled. Singh told press reporters, "These were probing attacks and they failed because our defence against such cyber-attacks is strong."

The Chinese government vehemently denied such attacks, but it had sent alarm bells ringing across India's high security establishments and supercritical sectors like power and telecom. Especially after a quick estimate by the Indian government showed that there were over two million CCTVs installed across the country, with over 90 per cent of them made by Chinese companies that were partially owned by the Chinese government. Worryingly, over half of them were installed in government departments. This was confirmed by Sanjay Dhotre, the minister of state for communications and IT, when he informed the Lok Sabha in March 2021 that around one million Chinese-made CCTVs are installed in government institutions. "There are vulnerabilities associated with video data captured through CCTV cameras being transferred to servers located abroad," said an alarmed Dhotre. He had avoided mentioning China directly, but it was evident which country he was hinting at.

> **"THE UNCHECKED PROLIFERATION OF FOREIGN-MADE CCTV DEVICES ACROSS THE COUNTRY POSES A SERIOUS SECURITY RISK"**
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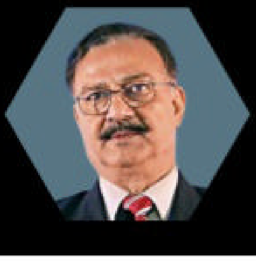
> 
>
> **LT GEN. RAJESH PANT (RETD)**
> *National Cyber Security Coordinator*

What is worrying is that experts point out that these CCTVs have weak technical architecture that can easily be compromised and used for offensive purposes. "You don't need to send spies across the border anymore—these CCTVs become the eyes of any country wanting to do mischief. They are the best tools to get techint (technical intelligence). The unchecked proliferation of such devices across the country is a serious security risk," Lt Gen. Rajesh Pant (retd), National Cyber Security Coordinator for the National Security Council at the prime minister's office, told INDIA TODAY. Pant said he had written to the Union ministry for home affairs (MHA) last month to issue a set of guidelines for the purchase of such equipment by any government department to prevent proliferation of unverified devices and to work out "remedial action" for those already installed. Currently, there is no nodal ministry that deals with the surveillance device issue.

The matter has gained urgency now after Australia and the UK banned imports of Chinese-made CCTVs for use in their respective government departments in quick succession in the past three months. In doing so, they joined the US, which had taken steps in this direction in 2019 itself and implemented a full ban in November 2022. Experts estimate the market penetration of such Chinese closed-circuit television cameras in India to be more than 80 per cent for domestic applications and more than 98 per cent for government installations—including military compounds and other high-security establishments. Mounted on eaves and cornices, and from atop walls, parapets and lampposts, they keep a constant eye on our activities, a crucial apparatus in this era of 24/7 surveillance. India's security experts fear that the potential loss of ultra-sensitive data by way of snooping through CCTVs has become a reality. The agent and beneficiary of such electronic espionage: our intransigent and hostile neighbour in the north and east, China.

CODE RED IN DEFENCE ESTABLISHMENTS

The National Security Council Secretariat (NSCS) and the Defence Intelligence Agency (DIA) have both raised concerns about the danger of data loss through surveillance cameras originating from China after it was revealed that they were installed in all Indian naval establishments. "Compromise of a CCTV system could also compromise the security of military establishments," claims a May 2021 internal note from the integrated defence headquarters of India's ministry of defence (MoD), seen by INDIA TODAY. Soon after, the southern naval command raised an alarm over Chinese CCTV cameras in its multiple lo-

cations. It is estimated that over 1,500 surveillance cameras that were being extensively used for security in the units and establishments of the southern naval command were of Chinese origin. The southern naval command, headquartered in Kochi, is the training command of the Indian navy. It has various naval installations in states like Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Goa, Odisha, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Lakshadweep.

The navy asked for the replacement or relocation of existing CCTV surveillance systems of Hikvision/ Prama Hikvision—the Chinese global market leader of surveillance devices and its Indian subsidiary—from sensitive locations, to be done in a phased manner. To address the security concerns, all naval establishments were asked not to connect these surveillance cameras and the respective storage devices to the internet. “If we continue to instal these Chinese surveillance cameras, we can only blame ourselves. We need to replace them with safe and secure surveillance systems urgently. Otherwise, we are under its (China's) eyes,” says Lt Gen. P.C. Katoch (retd), the former director general of information systems in the Indian army.

The Indian intelligence agencies’ biggest fear is that the blanket deployment of Chinese-origin CCTVs can, in a worst-case scenario, lead to uninterrupted data leaks to Chinese intelligence. They also suspect that some Chinese firms (working with Indian partners) are sending back data to Beijing through backdoor access to CCTVs—now installed at almost all Indian smart cities, police headquarters, highways and airports, besides central and state government departments, other installations and military establishments. Indeed, Video Security Surveillance (VSS) or CCTV is more than just a camera device being connected to a telecom network. These systems also contain video network recorders, through which all images, stored for later analysis, are connected to a network that can be linked to remote web servers. And that is where the national security risks crop up.

An Indian intelligence official says that modern surveillance cameras come with capabilities that can be switched on remotely when needed—for example, the ability to pick up sounds or read vehicle number plates. He is referring to the system-on-chip (SoC) of a CCTV camera which, with its processor and memory components, operates under software instruction and has apps with different functionalities such as motion and facial recognition embedded in them. The global market for SoCs had been dominated for years by China’s HiSilicon, which also supplies them to Hikvision and Dahua, the two firms that are among the world’s leading suppliers of CCTVs. Partly owned by the Chinese government, their products are extensively used by the Indian government and are mentioned in the MoD note as potentially dangerous. Once connected to the internet, enormous quantities of visual data can be transmitted back to China. Such disparate material over a variety of sources can potentially be integrated through data fusion to arrive at higher quality intelligence.

It is well-known that data from such surveillance

CHINESE SPYVERSE

China can potentially use its surveillance cameras to gather sensitive information. The West was the first to raise alarm and take action. India, too, needs to step up vigilance and block spying possibilities

Graphic by **TANMOY CHAKRABORTY**

The West's war against Chinese CCTVs

UNITED STATES

★ Under National Defense Authorisation Act (NDAA), 2019, US department of commerce places Hikvision, Dahua, Huawei, ZTE Corp and Hytera on an 'Entity List' along with 26 other Chinese entities, prohibiting US-based businesses from exporting their products to them

★ In Nov. 2019, President Trump signs order prohibiting US firms and individuals from investing in Chinese firms with links to its military

★ In Mar. 2021, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) puts 5 Chinese firms among entities deemed national security threats

★ In Oct. 2021, US legislature passes Secure Equipment Act prohibiting FCC to authorise such companies. FCC implements it in Nov. 2022

UNITED KINGDOM

★ Leaked CCTV footage in June 2021 shows then health secretary Matt Hancock kissing an aide. The scandal forces Hancock to resign. Hikvision cameras were reportedly used inside his office, raising concerns of a China hand in the leak

★ In Nov. 2022, the UK instructs government departments to stop installing Chinese CCTVs in sensitive sites. The order targets firms like Hikvision, Dahua and Huawei

★ Most of the nation's police force is found to be using Chinese surveillance cameras

AUSTRALIA

★ In February 2022, Australia decides to remove Chinese-made surveillance equipment from defence sites, citing security fears

How China-made CCTV cameras can snoop

★ The System-on-Chip (SoC) of a camera is the control centre of the CCTV. It has a processor which operates under software instruction

★ The software is stored in Flash Memory and Read only Memory (ROM), known as 'firmware'

★ Flash Memory holds the main operating system (OS) as well as software apps that can run on the OS

★ Applications like motion/ face detection and voice alerts help sift through large amounts of image data. Such 'analytics' are either controlled by the camera SoC or embedded in it

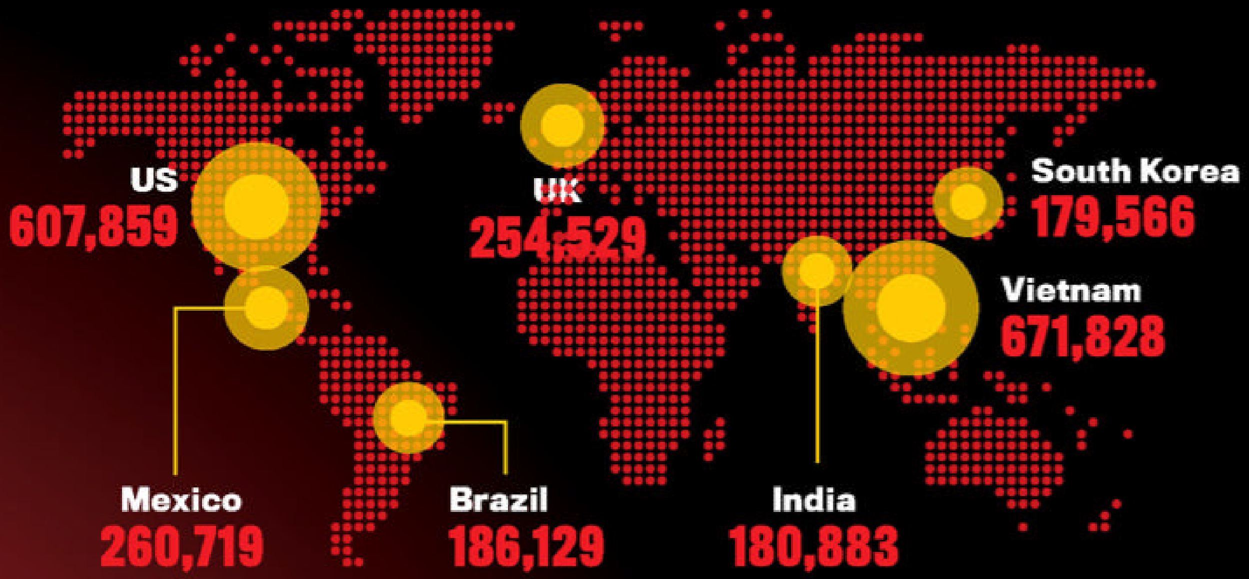
★ Advanced surveillance cameras can decide which data to capture, and when to connect to the internet. All this is controlled by the firmware, which in turn is controlled by the SoC provider

How to prevent snooping

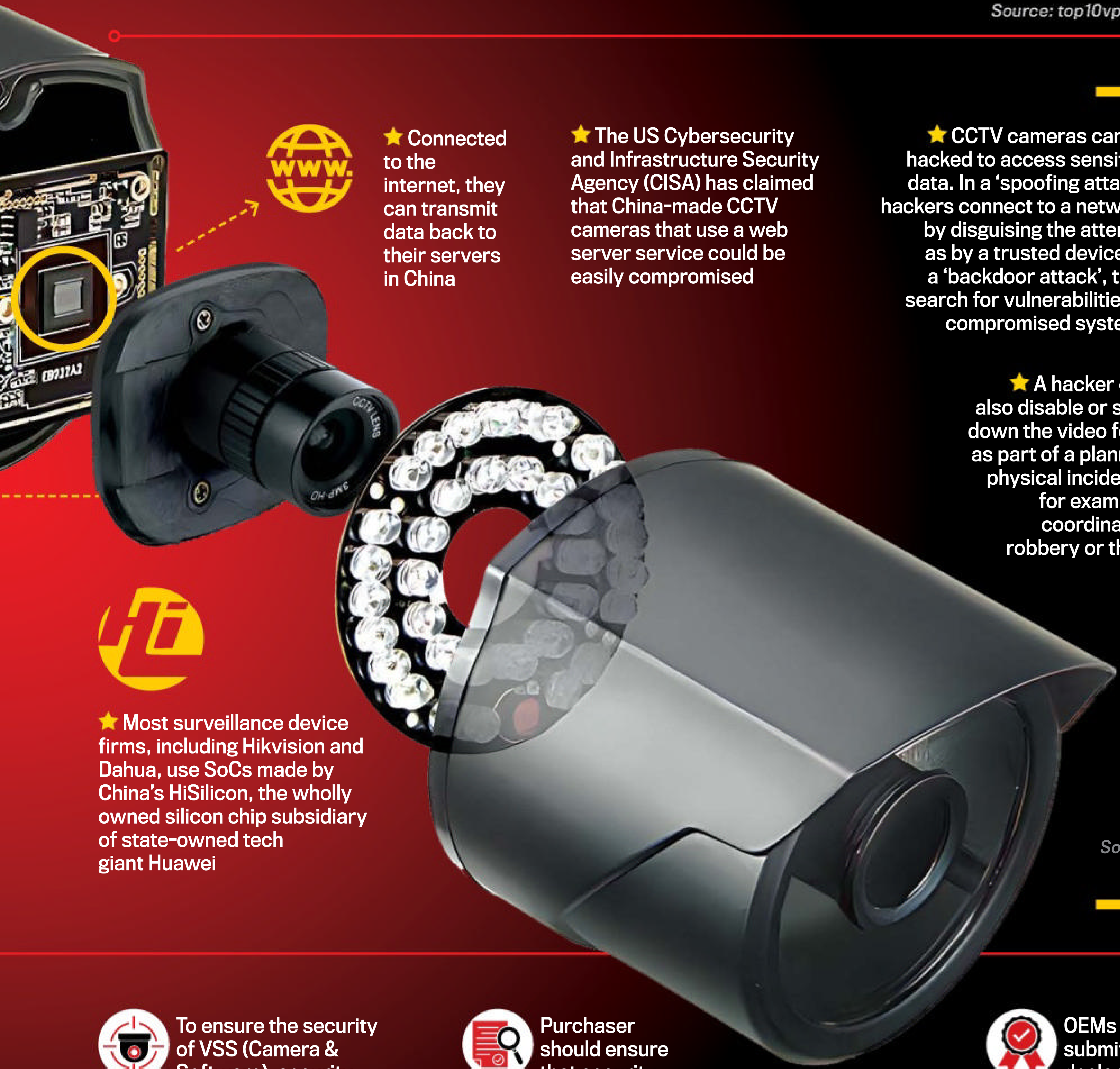
Any device connected to the internet can be hacked. This includes all cameras, wired or wireless. What's needed is a firewall between devices and the net connection

Dangerous Exposure

Currently, India stands 7th in the list of countries with the most Hikvision/ Dahua surveillance camera networks



Source: top10vpn.com



- Connected to the internet, they can transmit data back to their servers in China

- The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) has claimed that China-made CCTV cameras that use a web server service could be easily compromised

- CCTV cameras can be hacked to access sensitive data. In a 'spoofing attack', hackers connect to a network by disguising the attempt as by a trusted device. In a 'backdoor attack', they search for vulnerabilities in compromised systems

- A hacker can also disable or shut down the video feed as part of a planned physical incident– for example, coordinated robbery or theft

- Most surveillance device firms, including Hikvision and Dahua, use SoCs made by China's HiSilicon, the wholly owned silicon chip subsidiary of state-owned tech giant Huawei

Source: CEPA

To ensure the security of VSS (Camera & Software), security auditing and testing of equipment, including the source code of camera and software, should be carried out by IT ministry or any other agency from the list of empanelled information security auditing organisations of CERT-In

Purchaser should ensure that security auditing and testing at the time of Proof of Concept and during completion of the project are conducted. In case of any security breach in the system strict penal action must be initiated by the purchaser

Products for scrutiny include hardware like CCTVs, NVR, DVR and servers, and software like video management and analytics, facial recognition, command control

OEMs must submit a declaration certificate, showing they have their own manufacturing setups and IPR for the hardware and software, and declare the absence of third-party manufacturing from any company blacklisted in India or abroad systems can be used for AI (artificial intelligence)-based facial recognition, number plate recognition and object recognition. Lt Gen. Vinod Bhatia (retd), former director general of military operations (DGMO), suggests that AI facial recognition systems can be integrated with IP cameras—those that transmit and receive data over a network or the internet—used in CCTVs and can be used for surveillance. Using immediate facial detection, the system can easily identify regular personnel, VIPs and strangers, and upload recognition records to the platform. Such data in the wrong hands can seriously compromise security.

CLEAR AND PRESENT DANGER

Internationally too, many countries have imposed bans against Chinese-made CCTV cameras. Amidst fears of Chinese espionage, the US Federal Communication Commission banned and blacklisted both companies in the US, citing national security threats. The United States Department of Defense described Hikvision, along with 26 other firms, as being "either owned or controlled by the Chinese military". In fact, in August 2020, the US had invoked the National Defense Authorization Act and prohibited government agencies from purchasing video surveillance products from Hikvision.

THE FINANCE MINISTRY'S RULE TO STOP UNREGULATED IMPORT OF CHINESE GOODS HAS NOT BEEN EFFECTIVE. CHINESE FIRMS STILL DO BUSINESS THROUGH SALES TO INDIAN COMPANIES AT LOW RATES

Days after the UK government banned Chinese surveillance cameras in November 2022, Hikvision stated it was "categorically false" to portray it as a security threat and the Chinese foreign ministry issued vehement denials. The latest country to sound the tocsin has been Australia. On February 9 this year, it announced that it would remove Chinese CCTV cameras from defence sites over fears of espionage. The move came after an audit found 900 surveillance cameras made by Hikvision and Dahua on government buildings. Hikvision reacted to Australia's move in a similar manner, emphasising that it wasn't a security threat to Australia, and that it couldn't access video data of end-users.

Though unrelated to surveillance cameras, the shooting down of a Chinese "spy balloon" by the US on February 4 shows how concerned the West is about international surveillance programmes run by Chinese 'military-civil fusion entities'. The US alleged the balloon was monitoring multiple defence sites; China said it was used for scientific and meteorological purposes and had entered US airspace accidentally. After examining debris from the balloon, the US has now added five Chinese firms and a research institute connected to Beijing's suspected surveillance balloon programme to an export blacklist.

In India, following the incursion by Chinese troops in Ladakh in May 2020 and the subsequent clash in Galwan valley in June, the ministry of finance's department of expenditure issued GFR (General Finance Rule)144 xi on July 23, 2020, to ensure that Chinese firms do not directly or through their Indian/ Chinese subsidiaries participate in procurements without prior registration with the department for promotion of industry and internal trade (DPIIT). The GFR applies to all states, central departments, public institutions as well as Chinese firms, their Indian subsidiaries and their branches or agencies. However, security insiders claim that the Chinese CCTV industry has found innovative means to circumvent the barrier and continues to supply to India, especially for government installations. To circumvent the finance ministry's order, Chinese firms often plan indirect participation through sales to local companies by way of semi-knockdown kits at low rates. Domestic importers or distributors that regularly appear on GeM (Government e-Marketplace) have also started importing Chinese goods indirectly from Taiwan, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Dubai and the Philippines. In short, though awareness—and suspicion—of widespread espionage through VSS does exist in security circles, the laws are too general to combat it.

THE BACKDOOR ENTRY

Chinese government-owned companies like Hikvision and Dahua supply CCTVs in the form of either finished or semi-finished (with almost 90 per cent of the components from China) products to all Indian domestic brands. They also supply VSS hardware and software to the Indian market through their Indian subsidiaries, joint ventures or distributors. And, according to the China Intelligence Law, 2017, a legal provision enforced by the People's Republic of China, these companies are duty-bound to share all their data with the Chinese state intelligence agencies.

India's exposure to these firms is alarmingly widespread—it ranks seventh in the list of countries that have the most Hikvision and Dahua surveillance camera net-

END OF SPYCRAFT
US Navy sailors recover a high-altitude surveillance balloon (inset), allegedly deployed by China, after it was shot down off the coast of South Carolina, Feb. 5

AP

works. In 2020, Hikvision had won a tender from the Delhi government to install 150,000 CCTV cameras in the national capital. It is also listed as a vendor by Bharat Electronics Limited (BEL), which works on highly sensitive and classified defence projects. More worryingly, the same firm has also supplied cameras to the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC), the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and the Special Protection Group (SPG), which is responsible for the security of the prime minister. Its surveillance cameras are being extensively used in military establishments.

Hikvision and Dahua are, in fact, at the very centre of the suspicion of espionage circling around Chinese surveillance devices. The internal note by the MoD identified Hikvision as having 41 per cent Chinese government holding and noted that it operates in India in collaboration with an Indian company. "The modules of these cameras systems are supplied by the Chinese firm; however, these products are marketed as 'Made in India'," says the MoD letter. It added that loss of data could be through programmed/ coded servers or embedded hardware for wi-fi or SIM-based connectivity or, during maintenance or replacement, culled from the memory/ cache of the surveillance system.

INDIA TODAY contacted Prama Hikvision and Dahua Technology India Private Limited—the Indian subsidiaries of Hikvision and Dahua—for their comments. While Prama Hikvision hasn't responded, Dahua in its response said, "As a private sector business, we are neither owned nor controlled by any government. Dahua takes its compliance

CHINA'S EYES IN THE SKY

➘ Per US intelligence, Chinese 'spy balloons' of the type shot down over the US conduct surveillance from the upper atmosphere at altitudes above where commercial jets fly—between 60,000 ft and 80,000 ft, or higher

➘ Part of a vast surveillance programme of the People's Liberation Army, they have flown across five continents and collected information on military assets of countries like India, Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines

➘ Equipped with a detection and fight function, they can provide earth space communication relay functions to ground operations personnel infiltrating into any country

➘ Provided with EMP (electro-magnetic pulse) jamming capability

➘ The six entities the US has banned for alleged links to Beijing's spy balloon programme are: Beijing Nanjiang Aerospace Technology Co., China Electronics Technology Group Corp, Dongguan Lingkong Remote Sensing Technology Co., Eagles Men Aviation Science & Technology Group, Guangzhou Tian-Hai-Xiang Aviation Technology Co., Shanxi Eagles Men Aviation Science & Technology Group responsibilities seriously. We supply locally manufactured products in India and our practices are compliant with relevant laws and regulations. Dahua maintains high standards to ensure product and data security. We do not store or manage customer data, and we do not transmit data to any third parties. We adhere to common standards for security practices in our industry and comply with all applicable laws, regulations and business ethics of each market in which we operate."

DANGEROUS LIAISONS

An MoD source says that Hikvision began as a Chinese state entity and maintains close ties with the country's Communist regime. The China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC), a fully state-owned defence-industrial conglomerate, is its largest shareholder. "With generous state support at home and low-cost sales abroad, Hikvision has become the world's surveillance heavyweight. Its facilities can churn out 260,000 cameras daily. In 2019, it produced nearly a quarter of the world's surveillance cameras, with sales in more than 150 countries," he claims.

In fact, such is the pricing of Chinese CCTVs on account of economies of scale that the incentives of importing the technology and marketing, rebranding and selling the same as 'Made in India' far outweigh the benefits of investment in local manufacturing or research and development. As a result, most leading Indian and global brands have discontinued their own product lines. For example, for CCTVs, the Bhopal Smart City project opted for products of a prominent US-based firm. However, it got all cameras manufactured by the Chinese behemoth Dahua. The same model has been replicated by many companies for installation at sensitive government establishments.

The threat perception involving Chinese-made electronic/ digital devices is not a new development. In 2014, based on inputs from the Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (Cert-In), the Indian Air Force asked its personnel and their families not to use Xiaomi Redmi 1 smartphones. The phones were suspected to have been forwarding the phone number, device identifier, address book numbers and text messages back to servers in China.

Similarly, in November 2017, three months after the border standoff in Doklam, the army asked all troops on the China border to format their smartphones and delete Chinese-origin apps like Truecaller and WeChat. The applications, 42 in all, were suspected to contain spyware or malicious ware linked to Chinese hackers. In 2015, top US-based cybersecurity firm FireEye had claimed in a report that Chinese hackers were spying on Indian government and commercial entities for political, economic and military information. Also in 2015, the defence ministry had restricted internet access for its personnel in New Delhi's South Block and asked them not to use wi-fi and Bluetooth-enabled devices due to fears of hacking. Over the last two years, the Union government has banned 100 plus Chinese mobile phone apps citing a "threat to national security".

Intelligence sleuths recently came across a case wherein an American company claimed to be supplying 'made in USA' products over the past two-three years, but which was discovered in August 2022 to have Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS) certification showing that they had been manufactured at the Hikvision factory in Shanghai. The cameras are being supplied to critical departments such as the National Highways Authority of India, the J&K Police, the Airports Authority of India and the Union ministry of home affairs (MHA). After the revelation, the company's tender for supplying CCTVs to the J&K Lieutenant Governor's office in Srinagar was cancelled. However, no further action was taken.

THE NEED FOR RAPID REMEDY

In the absence of any specific guidelines for the home ministry, many experts are now calling for additional terms and conditions to be implemented for the entire procurement process of VSS systems to ensure foolproof safety from espionage. National Cyber Security Coordinator Pant says he has funded the government-owned Centre for Development of Telematics (C-DOT) to work out a national trust centre for software and hardware testing to verify devices being purchased by sensitive government departments. The other example he cites is Singapore, which has come out with IoT (Internet of Things) star ratings that indicate whether or not a device has been cleared for snooping bugs.

Experts point to official complacency about the compulsory compliance of CCTVs under BIS. Existing standards for CCTV systems are the same that apply to mobile phones, cash registers, laptops, set-top boxes, power banks and the like, whereas the need of the hour, they say, are regulations that specifically address national security concerns. "Nowhere does it talk about its national security aspects. BIS only mention human hazards like fire or their durability," says N.K. Goel, chairman of the Telecom Equipment Manufacturers Association of India (TEMA).

While flagging national security concerns with regard to surveillance systems, military experts also point out how various household devices are increasingly being connected to the internet—from televisions to washing machines—and are thus susceptible to deployment for data theft. "Xiaomi, a top Chinese manufacturer of phones and other gadgets, sells a fitness band with a military-grade sensor and 30-day battery life for $35. These watches often track movements, heart rates and sleep patterns. So, there is always a fear of being snooped," says a military observer.

Lt Gen. Bhatia says that the Chinese can easily amass crucial information through data fusion by combining inputs from CCTVs with other available data (from mobile phones, for instance). "China can easily have remote control access to these surveillance devices," he says. "The threat is imminent; besides making changes in our procurement process, we need to make our troops aware of new ways of snooping by China."

In addition to the national security threat, the market dominance of Chinese-made CCTVs is a lost opportunity for India to become a net exporter of surveillance hardware through manufacturing, rather than just the assembly of Chinese goods. According to a report by Market Research Future, a Pune-based market analysis company, the global CCTV market is expected to grow to approximately $46.52 billion (Rs 3.8 lakh crore) at a 13.1 per cent CAGR (compound annual growth rate) between 2020 and 2030. Industry insiders claim that due to Chinese imports, India has almost no share in the above. However, things could change if cheap Chinese imports flooding our market are brought to a halt and Indian companies are encouraged.

EXISTING STANDARDS FOR CCTVS ARE THE SAME AS FOR CELLPHONES, LAPTOPS ETC., WHEREAS THE NEED OF THE HOUR, EXPERTS SAY, ARE REGULATIONS THAT ADDRESS NATIONAL SECURITY CONCERNS

Now that alarm bells have started ringing in the security establishment, a department in North Block is looking at curbing potential Chinese spying through surveillance devices, but the widespread network of suspicious CCTVs has made it an uphill task. Intelligence agencies have confirmed instances where they found that devices have chips installed in them that are capable of sending back information to China. However, if the Centre puts an immediate ban on everything related to the Chinese telecom network, it would affect its own surveillance mechanism. Replacing entire surveillance systems will also mean incurring an additional financial burden. Experts, therefore, recommend taking action in a phased manner, beginning with highly sensitive security establishments and then gradually phasing it out in other government institutions.

"What we are trying to tweak are the Chinese chips embedded in cameras. In some instances, it was found these chips are reprogrammable by Indian software. If that is done, the Chinese snooping menace can be curtailed," says a cyberexpert working with the government, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Banning (of Chinese-made CCTVs) is a political step. We need to make sure there is no backdoor entry of Chinese intelligence into surveillance devices," he says, adding that the absence of any clear-cut data protection law further complicates the situation. The more pressing concern at the moment, though, is the effective weeding out of Chinese surveillance systems that can compromise the nation's security. As the clock ticks on, an effective and foolproof legal response with adequate action on the ground is awaited. ■

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THE FINAL COUNTDOWN

PM MODI AND THE BJP KNOW THAT THE CRUCIAL STATE ELECTIONS THIS YEAR WILL SET THE MOMENTUM FOR THE BIG BATTLE IN 2024. MEANWHILE, OTHER NIGGLES HAVE TO BE IRONED OUT, INCLUDING INTERNAL FACTIONAL FEUDS AND LOSSES FROM EX-ALLIES

By Anilesh S. Mahajan

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

भारतीय जनता पार्टी
राष्ट्रीय कार्यकारिणी बैठक
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POWER CENTRES
PM Narendra Modi with BJP president J.P. Nadda at a party meet

The events of the past few weeks have been a testing time for the country's ruling party, what with the crony capitalism charges against the Adanis and a damning BBC documentary on the 2002 Gujarat riots. But, as always, the fightback has been led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself, starting off with his speeches in both houses of Parliament during the motion of thanks to the President's address. Political analysts have focused on one line from it—"*Desh dekh raha hai, ek akela kitnon pe bhari padh raha hai* (The country is watching how one man alone has taken on so many)"—to get a sense of the course the PM's party, the Bharatiya Janata Party, is likely to take in the run-up to the 2024 general election. The vaunted BJP poll machine is a feat in itself, but they believe it'll finally boil down to how well the party can sell the 'Modi vs the Others' narrative if it is to get a third consecutive term in power.

A few days before the Hindenburg report on Adani Entreprises created havoc, the INDIA TODAY-CVoter Mood of the Nation survey saw PM Modi's approval ratings at a high of 72 per cent. The same survey suggested that the BJP may bag 284 seats in the 543-member lower house of Parliament if elections were to be held today. Riding on this, the BJP leadership has set an improbable target for itself, crossing the halfway mark on the vote share tab in 2024, a feat no political party has managed in all these years. In 2019, the BJP had got 37.3 per cent of the popular vote. That belief, though, may have taken a slight hit after the Hindenburg report on Adani and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi's pointed attacks in Parliament, which necessitated PM Modi's rejoinder.

DRESS REHEARSAL

Before the general election, however, the dominant party in the country has to navigate a series of state polls. Its performance here will set the template for 2024, inasmuch as keeping the BJP cadre on a high or seeing a resurgent opposition knocking on its doors. The test has already begun, with the BJP trying to defend its territory in the Northeast as Tripura kickstarted poll season on February 17. It's a state the BJP is pushing hard to retain, as it had been wrested from their ideological opponents, the Left (it's been an uphill struggle in other states with Communist influence such as Kerala and West Bengal), after overturning the 25-year-old CPI(M) regime led by Manik Sarkar in 2018. The party isn't holding out much hope in Meghalaya and Nagaland, though, which go to the polls on February 27. In Meghalaya, erstwhile ally Conrad Sangma and his National People's Party (NPP) have decided to go it alone, having earlier exited the BJP-anchored North Eastern Democratic Alliance (NEDA). The party is playing second fiddle to Neiphiu Rio's Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) in Nagaland.

The results in these states may not have much of an impact on national political equations as together they send just five MPs, of which the BJP currently has two, two are from allies and Vincent Pala is the lone Congress lawmaker. However, any gains in these states will help erase some of the anti-minority stigma hanging over the party; Meghalaya and Nagaland have overwhelmingly Christian populations.

Coming back to the focus states, the party will get a chance to fine-tune caste equations and other permutations in six states that are headed for the polls—Karnataka, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Telangana and Mizoram. Mizoram is the only state in the Northeast where the party is yet to be part of a government. In Telangana, the party is trying to position itself as the principal opposition. Among the other four, the party is the incumbent in Karnataka and MP while it will be the principal opponent in Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan. The last four states are crucial for 2024 as together they account for 96 seats, of which the BJP had won 90 in 2019.

The biggest worry for the party in these states is intra-party factionalism. In Rajasthan, the BJP is already doing some 'surgery' to sort this out. Former chief minister Vasundhara Raje, 69, may not be the central leadership's favourite but it seems like she could be the frontrunner again to lead the party cam-

APPEALING TO THE MASSES

THE HIGH POINTS

- **NATIONALISM**: Tough stand on Pakistan, taking on China, leadership role in the world, including presiding over G20 this year
- **HINDUTVA:** Ram Mandir, abrogation of Article 370, relentless on love jihad, leaders like Adityanath and Himanta Sarma along with PM Modi
- **INCLUSIVE:** Party has shed image of being a Brahmin-Baniya party
- **MUSLIM ASSIMILATION:** Targeting OBC/ Dalit section of community, opening doors for Pasmanda Muslims
- **PRO-POOR:** Social schemes benefitting all even in non-BJP states
- **PRO-DEVELOPMENT:** Reforms push, construction of highways and upgradation of railways a push towards a brighter future

THE PITFALLS

- Anti-incumbency against some MPs
- Too dependent on PM Modi; local satraps are missing/ weak
- Opposition unity is difficult, but not impossible
- Unemployment remains massive challenge, unrest among young voters visible
- 2024 might be PM Modi's last poll, considering the 75-year retirement age. No succession planning

paign. Many of her bitter critics, like Ghanshyam Tiwari (Rajya Sabha MP) and Gulab Chand Kataria (former leader of the opposition and now Assam governor), have been turfed out of the state. Raje will still have leaders like Union minister Gajendra Shekhawat and Lok Sabha speaker Om Birla to deal with, though.

Similarly, the anti-Shivraj Singh Chouhan group in MP is lobbying hard with the central leadership to shift him to Delhi and fight the assembly polls with a fresh face. Union cabinet minister Narendra Singh Tomar's name is being bandied about as a possible replacement, but since he is "not a pan-MP leader", it is holding the party back.

In Telangana, state unit chief Bandi Sanjay Kumar is struggling to manage the Bharat Rashtra Samithi and Congress turncoats who have joined the party. BJP general secretary Sunil Bansal has been in the state since August 2022 as a 'super in-charge' and is trying to solicit feedback on the way ahead from street meetings by state leaders. In Chhattisgarh, the party is vacillating on whether to let ex-CM Raman Singh take the lead again.

The party still has time to sort out these battles, but its real war is in Karnataka. In the first week of February, the BJP appointed Union minister Dharmendra Pradhan—a party veteran in election management—to anchor the elections in the southern state. The party is battling factionalism, anti-incumbency even as new chief minister Basavaraj Bommai remains embroiled in one controversy after another. There's also the residual anger of the dominant Lingayat community who are upset over B.S. Yediyurappa's removal from the post of CM in 2021. In mid-February, party chief J.P. Nadda met seers from the Lingayat community along with others. The party has also been reaching out to the Vokkaliga and Kurba communities, particularly in the old Mysuru region.

CHANDRADEEP KUMAR

THE ZERO SUM STATES

In 2019, the BJP drew a nought in three southern states—Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh—which together send 84 lawmakers to the Lok Sabha. In Tamil Nadu, the BJP has an alliance with AIADMK, which itself is in disarray after a disastrous state election. In Kerala, after experimenting with fringe outfits like the Bharath Dharma Jana Sena or BDJS (a consolidation of the Hindu Ezhava community) and the Kerala Congress (P.C. Thomas faction), the party is trying to get the backing of the Catholic community. Last September, while touring the state, Nadda had closed-door meetings with the archbishops and other senior church members. The BJP had bagged around 13 per cent of the vote in the 2019 general election (the NDA-plus vote share was 15.6 per cent) and even managed to push the CPI(M)-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) to third place in the Thiruvananthapuram Lok Sabha seat. To build the confidence of the community, BJP leaders are talking up matters like PM Modi's invitation to Pope Francis to come to India during his 2021 Rome visit while also highlighting issues that worry the Christians like 'love jihad'. The conversations have continued with leaders of Kerala's churches meeting Union home minister Amit Shah and others in New Delhi. There's also now an RSS-backed Christian 'pressure group', the Bharatiya Christian Sangamam, whose offices in Kochi were inaugurated by the well-regarded Bishop Mathew Arackal. However, the community continues to be apprehensive about the BJP stand on critical issues such as the beef ban and the attacks on its parishes in north India over the 'conversions' issue. Christians make up about 18 per cent of the population in Kerala and conventionally vote for the UDF, "but this time we have a chance", says a party insider.

> **IN MANY OF THE STATES GOING TO THE POLLS, THE BJP FACES INTRA-PARTY FACTIONALISM. IT IS ALREADY DOING "SURGERY" IN SOME TO SORT THIS OUT**

Similarly, the party is wooing two segments that were earlier considered out of bounds—the Dravidians in Tamil Nadu and Panthic Sikhs in Punjab. Here again, the party is hoping that PM Modi will help make inroads. In November 2022, the PM's constituency, Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, hosted a month-long festival, the Kashi-Tamil Sangamam, which was visited by

THE GENERALS
(From left) BJP heavywights Yogi Adityanath, Nitin Gadkari,Rajnath Singh, Amit Shah and others at the national executive in Delhi, Jan. 16

2,500 delegates from Tamil Nadu. In January, at his annual town hall with students, '*Pariksha pe charcha*', Modi highlighted the rich history of the Tamil language, calling it one of India's "big treasures" and a "source of pride". He even acknowledged that the language is the oldest in the world, a departure in a sense from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's position of Sanskrit being superior to any other language.

In Punjab, the party is using a different strategy, flooding the state unit with turncoats from the Congress and the Akali Dal. This includes Manjinder Singh Sirsa, former chief of the Delhi Sikh Gurdwara Management Committee (DSGMC), Kanwarpal Tohra, former Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Committee (SGPC) chief Gurcharan Singh Tohra's grandson, and Didar Singh Bhatti, a member of the SGPC. They have even made an *amritdhari* (baptised) Sikh, Iqbal Singh Lalpura, chief of the National Commission for Minorities and inducted him into the BJP's top decision-making body, the parliamentary board. How this will square with the party's traditional Hindu vote base in the state is uncertain at this point, especially since some of the recruits are of a persuasion that holds slain terrorist Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale a saint/ martyr. Even a year back, a leader professing such leanings would have been unthinkable in the BJP, but such are the exigencies of politics. In a recent reshuffle of the state unit, 11 of the 27 office-bearers came from the dominant Jat Sikh community.

Back again in the south, the party is in a muddle over whether or not to tie up with N. Chandrababu Naidu's Telugu Desam Party (TDP). In 2019, the Y.S. Jagan Mohan Reddy-led YSR Congress had swept the simultaneous Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha polls, crushing the TDP. More than the BJP, it's a desperate TDP that is pushing for an alliance now. Last August, Naidu had even met PM Modi after a gap of five long years. A tie-up will give the BJP some added leverage in neighbouring Telangana though there is one school of thought that believes the party should go it alone, play along with Jagan and reward him for his passive support of the NDA.

HELPING HANDS

The govt functionaries helping the party organisation win elections

AMIT SHAH
Union home minister

De facto COO of BJP's election machine

DHARMENDRA PRADHAN, *HRD minister*

Is well networked with younger BJP leaders in BJP, close to RSS leaders too. Led UP campaign

GAJENDRA SINGH SHEKHAWAT
Water resources minister

Has direct access to Modi, Shah, Nadda and RSS leaders. Anchoring party push in tough Punjab

MANSUKH MANDAVIYA
Health minister

Close associate of PM Modi. Stock has risen after Gujarat poll performance. Co-in-charge of the Karnataka polls

BHUPENDER YADAV
Environment minister

Go-to man for dialogue with dissidents, RSS leaders

YOGI ADITYANATH
Uttar Pradesh CM

Sought-after leader during poll campaigns. Evoking Hindutva sentiments in saffron robes, he is now seen as a tough administrator

PRAHLAD JOSHI
Parliamentary affairs minister

Anchored party campaign in Uttarakhand

HIMANTA BISWA SARMA, *Assam CM*

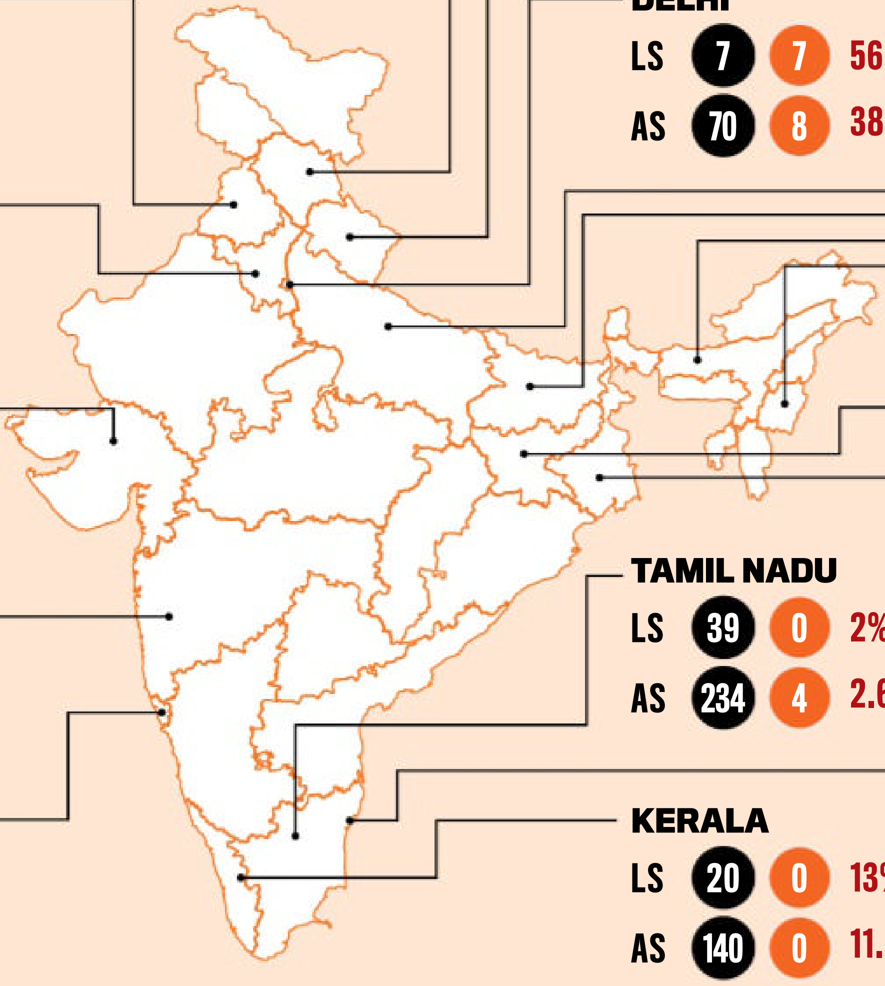
De facto head of Northeast operations. Trying to position himself as new icon of Hindutva

DEVENDRA FADNAVIS
Maharashtra deputy CM

Stock has risen after coup in Maharashtra. Anchored the sabotage in Congress's Goa unit as well. Has RSS backing

THE BJP JUGGERNAUT

The BJP has not been able to match the vote percentage it got during the 2019 general election in subsequent assembly polls



PUNJAB

LS 13 2 9.6%

AS 117 2 6.6%

HARYANA

LS 10 10 58%

AS 90 40 36.5%

GUJARAT

LS 26 26 62.2%

AS 182 156 52.5%

MAHARASHTRA

LS 48 28 27.8%

AS 230 109 25.7%

GOA

LS 2 1 51.2%

AS 40 20 33.3%

HIMACHAL PRADESH

LS 4 4 69.1%

AS. 68 25 43%

UTTARAKHAND

LS 5 5 61%

AS. 70 47 44.3%

DELHI

LS 7 7 56.9%

AS 70 8 38.5%

TAMIL NADU

LS 39 0 2%

AS 234 4 2.6%

KERALA

LS 20 0 13%

AS 140 0 11.3%

UTTAR PRADESH

LS 80 62 50%

AS. 403 255 41.3%

BIHAR

LS 40 17 23.6%

AS. 243 74 19.5%

ASSAM

LS 14 9 36%

AS 126 75 33.2%

MANIPUR

LS 2 2 34.3%

AS 60 32 36.3%

JHARKHAND

LS 14 12 51%

AS 81 25 33.4%

WEST BENGAL

LS 42 18 40.7%

AS 294 77 38%

PUDUCHERRY

LS 1 - N.A.

AS 30 6 14%

● Total seats ● Seats won by BJP in 2019 LS poll, last assembly poll ● Vote share %

LS: Lok Sabha seats; **AS:** Assembly seats

THE POLL ROAD AHEAD

KARNATAKA

PLUSES

- Congress infighting
- Dominant Lingayat community upset but still with BJP
- JD(S) may contest alone, giving BJP chance to take on Congress in Vokaligga-dominated Old Mysuru region

MINUSES

- Massive anti-incumbency
- CM Basvaraja Bommai is struggling to build image of a tough leader
- Factionalism in state unit

X-FACTORS

- Easing ageing leaders out, replacing them with younger candidates
- Ex-CM Yediyurappa is being prodded to play active role in campaign

TELANGANA

PLUSES

- Anti-incumbency against KCR regime
- State chief Bandi Sanjay Kumar's five-phase yatra got good response

MINUSES

- Party organisation weak, lacks dominant leaders
- Too dependent on engineering defections
- TRS is still strong in rural areas, so is Congress

X-FACTORS

- Bandi's ties with OBCs
- Possible tie-up with TDP

MADHYA PRADESH

PLUSES

- Stability and govt's pro-development approach
- Hindutva appeal

MINUSES

- CM Shivraj Chouhan's waning appeal
- Party organisation and govt on collision course
- Congress still a formidable force

X-FACTORS

- Hindutva
- Tribal support

RAJASTHAN

PLUSES

- Anti-incumbency against CM Ashok Gehlot
- Ex-CM Vasundhra Raje's popularity among voters

MINUSES

- Factionalism in the state
- BJP leadership not too keen on Raje's leadership

X-FACTORS

- Party accommodating oldies from anti-Raje camp
- Raje plus Modi factor can work in the state

CHHATTISGARH

PLUSES

- Anti-incumbency against Bhupesh Baghel's regime
- BJP consolidation among OBCs

MINUSES

- BJP leadership vacillating on giving ex-CM Raman Singh another shot

X-FACTORS

- Tribal support
- PM Modi's appeal

Graphic by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

REOILING THE POLL MACHINERY

At the party's national executive in mid-January, the BJP extended party chief Nadda's tenure till June next year despite the poll debacle in his home state, Himachal Pradesh. Insiders say the loss got buried in the celebrations over the party's biggest ever win in Gujarat. The buzz is the leadership is actively discussing an organisational rejig along with a Union cabinet reshuffle, with some cabinet ministers "withdrawn for organisational work". Sources say the party has asked 10 ministers (who are currently Rajya Sabha MPs) to look for constituencies to contest the 2024 Lok Sabha election. The BJP has drawn up a list of 160 Lok Sabha seats where the party candidates either lost or won marginally in 2019 (of these seats, 25 were contested by allies who have since quit the NDA). Full-time party workers, or *vistaraks*, have been appointed in all these constituencies to identify areas that require attention, resolve rivalries and build up the booth-level units. The constituencies are bundled into geographic clusters, with 44 Union ministers given charge.

All the states have been asked to update the *panna pramukhs* and *panna samitis* (the party's famous booth-level workers), with around 1.03 million polling booths identified. In 2017, then party president Shah had laid a similar plan for 120 seats; the BJP won roughly 30 per cent of them in 2019. Now Nadda is targeting a win percentage of 50 per cent in such seats.

THE PARTY HAS A LIST OF 160 LS SEATS THAT WILL RECEIVE SPECIAL FOCUS. OUT OF THEM, 25 WERE CONTESTED BY FORMER ALLIES IN 2019

The BJP has divided the states and Union territories into three categories—A, B and C—for the purpose of the elections. Tier A has states like Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, MP, where the party is in power either on its own or with allies. The focus here is to make sure the central and state schemes reach all *labharthis* or beneficiaries. In Tier B, where BJP is the principal opposition, like in Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh and West Bengal, leaders will be creating awareness about central schemes while exposing the state's inefficiencies. In Tier C states, where the party has potential (such as Punjab, Telangana and Kerala), new allies among new caste groups and PM Modi's goodwill is the fallback plan.

In 2019, the BJP put an age limit of 75 years for party candidates. If it sticks to the condition, the party will have to look for replacements of about 30 MPs.

STRENGTHENING NARRATIVES, WALKING THE TALK

BJP leaders acknowledge that unemployment is the biggest challenge before it as it sets out to face the electorate. Equally worrying is the shrinking spending power of a middle class that is already reeling under the consequences of Covid-related lockdowns. It has made issues such as fuel prices, inflation and even the opposition's demand for a return to the old pension scheme (OPS) for government staff seem all the more relevant.

PM Modi has made it clear to the BJP leadership as well as state chief ministers that he will not budge on fiscal reforms. However, there are murmurs within leaders in the party that a decision will have to be taken on two agendas at least—moving back to the OPS, and assessing the damage caused by pursuing the armed forces recruitment programme, Agniveer. Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra and what impact it has had in the five poll-bound states—Karnataka, Telangana, Chhattisgarh, MP and Rajasthan—is also being analysed. There are 180-odd Lok Sabha seats where the BJP takes the Congress head-on; in others, they are part of multi-cornered contests. That said, the party is taking out its own walkathons in these states, which should neutralise matters a bit.

GROUPING, REGROUPING

Three prominent allies—the then united Shiv Sena under Uddhav Thackeray in Maharashtra, Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal-United (JD-U) in Bihar and the Sukhbir Badal-led Shiromani Akai Dal in Punjab—have moved out of the NDA since 2019. In Maharashtra, Sena rebel and now CM Eknath Shinde has redressed the balance to an extent with his coup, bringing the bulk of party legislators and parliamentarians back into the NDA fold. However, it remains an unknown quantity electorally, even though the Election Commission giving it both the party name and the bow and arrow symbol is a big win. The first test will be the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) election, over which the Uddhav group will fight tooth and nail to retain control.

The party has adopted a wait-and-watch approach in Bihar. Former deputy CM from the BJP, Sushil Modi, says, "We can sense that Nitish is uncomfortable in the new alliance [with the Rashtriya Janata Dal]. He betrayed the public mandate and the confidence BJP had shown in him. Now there is no space for him." Another BJP leader from Bihar claims that the JD(U) will collapse on its own and hints that a substantial part of the leadership is keen to work with the BJP. In 2019, when the NDA included the JD(U) and the late Ramvilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), it swept 39 of the state's 40 Lok Sabha seats. Of these, the BJP won 17 seats, and is now targeting another eight.

The party is also redrawing its plans for West Bengal, Odisha and Telangana. RSS pracharak-turned-neta Bansal is again the master conductor, overseeing the preparations for 2024 in the three states. The BJP has taken a confrontationist approach with the ruling establishment in Bengal and Telangana while the plan is to wait out Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik and grow gradually in Odisha. The party had done well for itself in these states in 2019, bagging 18 of the 42 LS seats in Bengal, eight of the 21 in Odisha and four of the 17 in Telangana. It will be hoping to do even better in the 2024 general election. ■

WHY IT'S HOLDING STEADY

THOUGH VOLATILE, INDIAN BOURSES HAVEN'T TAKEN THE BEATING ONE ANTICIPATED IN THE WAKE OF HINDENBURG'S ADANI REVELATIONS. WHAT EXPLAINS THEIR RESILIENCE?

By M.G. Arun

00:04:00
MARKET CLOSING
अदानी
सवालों के घेरे में
COMING UP

MARKET RUN
People walk past the BSE building in Mumbai, Jan. 27

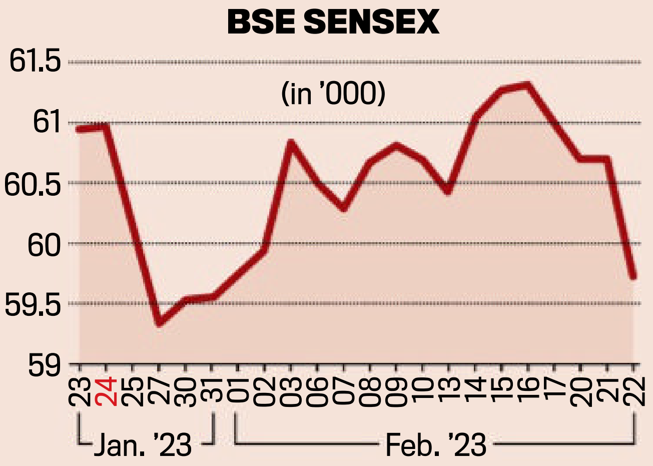
AP

On January 24, US-based short-seller Hindenburg Research set off a minor earthquake when it published a scathing report on one of India's largest business groups, helmed by a businessman steadily climbing the world's richest lists, the Ahmedabad-based Gautam Adani. Among its many accusations were manipulation of group companies stocks via shell firms in tax havens and accounting lapses. Coming shortly before Adani Enterprises' planned launch of a follow-on public offer, the revelations triggered panic selling of the shares of the nine listed group companies, sending their prices crashing on the Indian bourses. It not only eroded as much as $120 billion (nearly Rs 10 lakh crore) in investor wealth but also half the market capitalisation of the companies in a matter of just a week. Although robust quarterly results of group firms and pre-payment of over $1 billion (nearly Rs 8,280 crore) to release pledged shares in three group firms—Adani Ports & Special Economic Zone (APSEZ), Adani Green Energy and Adani Transmission—helped the group arrest the overall slide, the share prices of some of the companies continued to go downhill.

When a stock crisis of such magnitude hit a diversified corporate giant with huge exposure to the infrastructure and green energy sectors—both dear to the Modi government—many expected the Indian stock markets to tumble drastically. Fall they did in the immediate aftermath of the Hindenburg report and during the presentation of the Union budget and currently in anticipation of a further rate hike by the US Federal Reserve (on February 1, the US central bank had increased rates by a quarter of a percentage point). But they have generally remained in positive territory, even recording a *rise* of 0.5 per cent in the benchmark Sensex, per data for two weeks of stock trade on BSE post the Hindenburg saga. This was contrary to how markets typically react when buffeted by such big events. For instance, when the dotcom bubble burst in 2000, Indian stock markets fell by 4.7 per cent in two weeks. The Ketan Parekh scam a year later, where the stockbroker was accused of manipulating the prices of select stocks, saw markets fall 13 per cent in a fortnight. In 2001, when the twin towers fell in New York, the markets fell 11.3 per cent in two weeks in India. The Nirav Modi scam in 2018 saw a nearly 3 per cent fall and the IL&FS crisis that year, where defaults by the infrastructure lender led to a domino effect in the sector, saw the market crashing 9.5 per cent in the fortnight that followed, per media reports (see *Negative Reaction*). By contrast, the BSE Sensex peaked to 61,319 on February 16, higher than the 60,978 points it was at on January 24.

PANIC AND AFTER

The Hindenburg bomb that exploded on January 24 failed to dampen spirits on Dalal Street



NEGATIVE REACTION

How stock markets responded to big-shock events in the new millennium

% change in Sensex after 15 trading days

2000	Dotcom bubble burst	-4.7
2001	Ketan Parekh scam	-13.1
2001	9/11 attacks	-11.3
2007	Satyam scam	-10.4
2008	Subprime bubble	-12.8
2018	PNB-Nirav Modi scam	-2.9
2018	IL&FS scam	-9.5
2023	Adani Group turmoil	0.5

Source: BSE, Media Reports

Graphics by TANMOY CHAKRABORTY

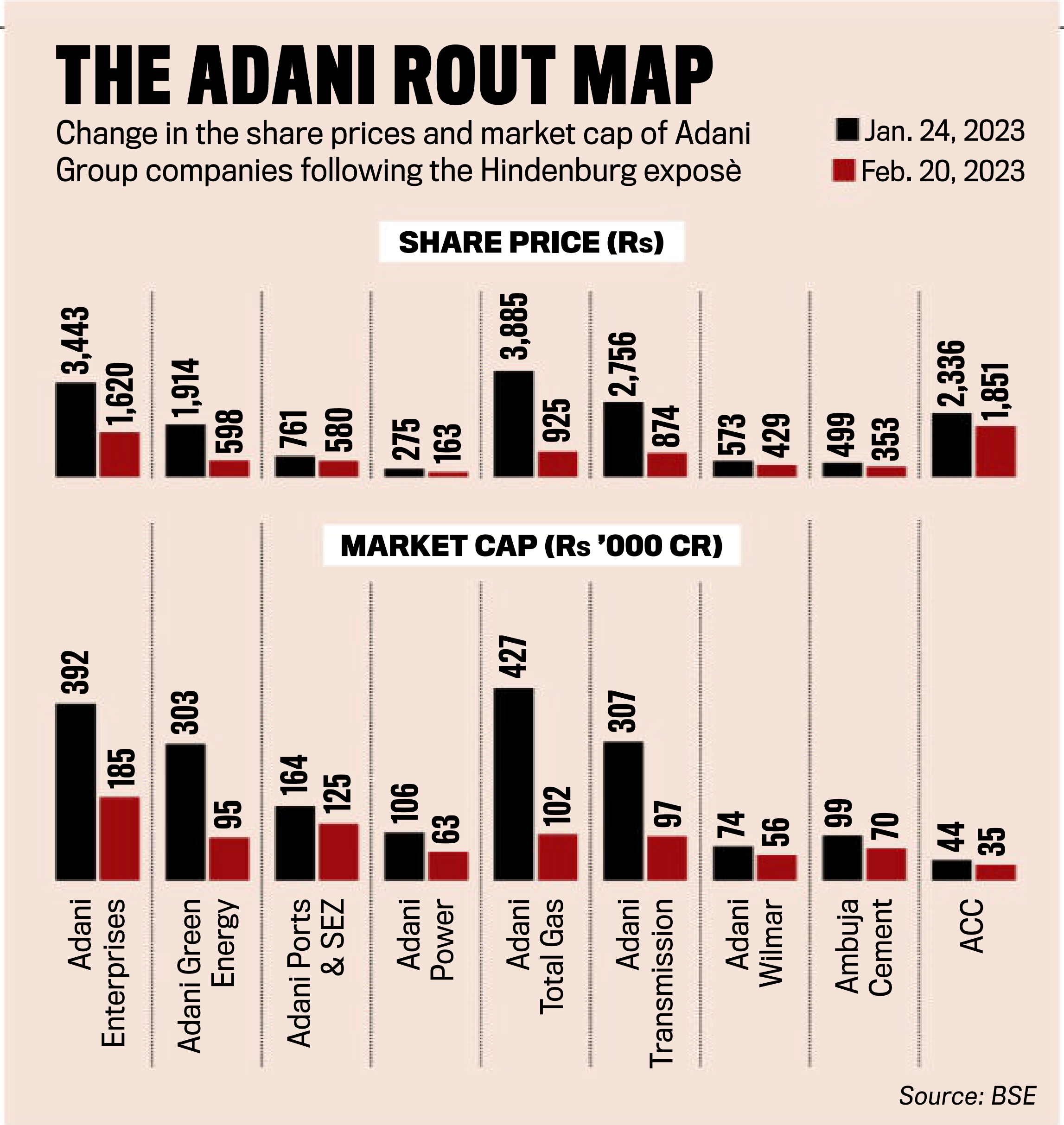
STAYING THE COURSE

Until February 20, nearly a month after the Hindenburg explosion, the Adani Group companies had seen an erosion of around $135 billion (over Rs 11 lakh crore) of their total equity market value, with Adani Total Gas taking the hardest hit. The total m-cap of the nine listed firms of the Adani Group stood at Rs 8.27 lakh crore on that date, less than half of the Rs 19.18 lakh crore on January 24. Shares of Adani Total Gas stood at Rs 925.10 on February 20 compared to the Rs 3,885.45 they traded at on January 24, a 76 per cent fall. The firm's m-cap fell from Rs 4.27 lakh crore on January 24 to Rs 1.01 lakh crore on February 20 (see *The Adani Rout Map*).

Despite this rout in the Adani stocks, the overall indices seem to be delinked from the crisis. Why is that

THE ADANI ROUT MAP

Change in the share prices and market cap of Adani Group companies following the Hindenburg exposè



Source: BSE

so? For one, investors see Adani's problems as restricted to the group alone, with no ramifications for the wider corporate world. Moreover, as more facts emerge on the fundamentals of the conglomerate, including its large asset base and reduced exposure to Indian banks compared to a few years ago, large institutional investors are feeling more reassured. The macroeconomic fundamentals of the country remain strong as well. Although the threat of inflation has not receded entirely, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has succeeded in keeping it closer to the upper range of 6 per cent. India's growth rate, estimated at 7 per cent for 2022-23, is seen as better than most large countries across the world, and the economy seems resilient. The recent Economic Survey has estimated growth to be at 6.5 per cent in 2023-24.

Another reason is the low weightage of the Adani stocks on the overall indices. "The market cap of the nine listed Adani group companies is not even one per cent in the market cap of the benchmark indices—the Nifty or the Sensex," says Arun Kejriwal, founder, Kejriwal Research & Investment Services. "There is one company with a large market cap—that is Adani Enterprises. But we should discount the fall in value of Adani Enterprises simply because that is a closely held company. Promoters and family own almost 72.6 per cent in the company. So, there is no question of a large number of retail investors being affected by the fall." Besides Adani Enterprises, four other firms—Adani Transmission, Adani Total Gas, Adani Green Energy and Adani Power—have lost significant value in m-cap since January 24. Promoters hold 75 per cent and 74.2 per cent, respectively, in Adani Power and Adani Transmission. APSEZ, on the other hand, is widely held by investors, with family ownership at 65 per cent. "APSEZ's shares have found their own level," says Kejriwal. "The two cement companies were recently acquired (from Swiss firm Holcim) and are still trading a shade higher than the price they were acquired for. Meanwhile, Adani Wilmar's price has fallen, but it is freely trading. Adani Power, too, has significant retail investors." Individual investors held Rs 54,066 crore in the listed Adani group firms (including NDTV, which it acquired last year) on January 24, say media reports. Retail investors were the highest in Adani Power, at 5.7 per cent in December-end.

Other experts, too, point to the low retail shareholding in group companies. "There is hardly any public holding of shares in the Adani listed firms, and that was an allegation raised by Hindenburg," says the head of a leading mutual fund. "If the Hindenburg report is right, all the gains in the past on the stock market have gone to Adani, and all the losses too have been suffered by him." The impact of the crash in Adani stocks has therefore been minimal on retail investors.

However, when there are convulsions in a large and highly diversified industrial group with nine listed companies, don't the tremors go down the bourses? After all, the Adani group is India's largest airport

"THE STOCK MARKET IS SUPPORTED BY THE POSITIVE SENTIMENT AROUND INDIA'S GROWTH STORY"

NILESH SHAH
MD, Kotak Mahindra Asset Management Co.

operator, handling 25 per cent of the passenger traffic and 40 per cent of air cargo; the largest ports and logistics operator, with a 30 per cent market share; the largest integrated energy company; the second largest cement manufacturer and the largest edible oils manufacturer.

FUNDAMENTALLY STRONG

If at all the Adani imbroglio had an impact on the markets, experts believe it was in the short term. Market players outline three factors drive the stock market—flows (inflow and outflow of funds), sentiments and fundamentals. While the first two have a short-term impact on the market, the fundamentals have long-term implications. “While the Adani Group is into critical infrastructure, their contribution is not even one per cent in a $3.5 trillion economy,” says a source. Similarly, the Rs 17,000 crore profits of Adani companies are a small percentage of the around Rs 10 lakh crore in overall profits of Indian corporates, the source adds. As for sentiments, investors have survived the Adani shock because many had factored in the risks of investing in Adani stocks. Sources in the mutual funds industry say that they have no investments in Adani shares since local investors did not want to risk putting their money into the company’s stocks.

Meanwhile, the Indian economy’s fundamentals remain strong, which reflects in the largely positive stock indices. Rumki Majumdar, director and macroeconomist, Deloitte India, says private sector balance sheets have improved over the past couple of years, implying that it is poised to increase spending, which can boost capital expenditure as and when the investment cycle picks up. “High goods and services tax (GST) and direct tax collections have provided the government ammunition to spend and cushion the impact of the impending global slowdown and keep the economy buoyant,” she noted in Deloitte’s “India economic outlook” report in January. Consumer demand among the affluent class remains strong as is evident from the robust growth in the retail industry and the better profit performance of consumer staples and discretionary companies in recent quarters. Under challenges, she lists inflation, the possibility of a global slowdown as central banks raise interest rates, and the need to improve the labour market.

WHY MARKETS HAVE HELD FIRM

1. Investors see the Adani crisis as something that affects the group alone, without any ramification for the larger corporate world

2. Macroeconomic fundamentals of the country remain strong. India’s growth rate, estimated at 7 per cent for FY23, is seen as better than that of most large countries

3. Low weightage of the Adani stocks on the overall indices. The market capitalisation of the nine listed Adani Group firms is less than 1 per cent of the m-cap of benchmark indices

4. High promoter holding (close to 75 per cent) in some Adani Group companies translates to low retail shareholding, and thus lower impact on investors at large

5. Many investors had already factored in the risks of investing in Adani stocks and stayed away from the more risky ones with high promoter holding

WHAT LIES AHEAD

How sustainable is this resilience of the stock markets? Although they seem to have survived the immediate crisis brought on by the Adani episode, the markets are likely to witness considerable volatility in the coming weeks and months. “For the next 12 to 18 months, the stock market will be volatile,” says Nilesh Shah, MD, Kotak Mahindra Asset Management Co. Fears around further rate hikes by the Federal Reserve, the US central bank, India’s general election in May 2024, the reopening of China post-Covid and the geopolitical uncertainties around the Ukraine war will have a material impact on the stock market, he adds. If there is no escalation in the Ukraine war, or if there is a stable government in India in 2024, the markets will remain positive. “The stock market is supported by the positive sentiment around India’s growth story,” Shah adds. Kejriwal backs the argument. “If we are where we are despite the Adani episode, it shows the inherent strength of our market. The strength is coming from mutual fund inflows through SIPs (systematic investment plans) and investors’ contributions to mutual funds is at their highest. Month after month, we see huge inflows and whatever foreigners sell is lapped up by domestic institutions,” he says. Another positive is that although the RBI has hiked interest rates multiple times in the past year, they have still been only half of what the US has done.

A buoyant stock market is increasingly being showcased as a measure of a robust economy. Indian markets have shown they can survive the biggest of crises. That should make them attractive in a world riddled with uncertainty. But there is no room for complacency, as investors will hold the economy’s fundamentals to sharp scrutiny in the days ahead. ■

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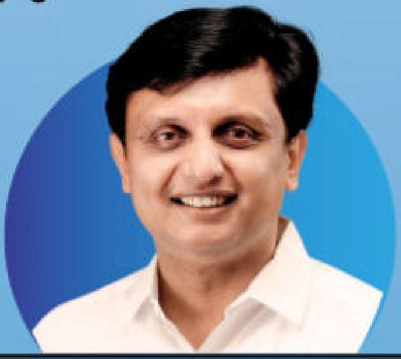

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THE PENSION TENSION

ECONOMISTS MAY BE AGHAST AT THE REVOLT AGAINST THE NEW PENSION SCHEME (NPS) AND THE CLAMOUR FOR RETURN TO THE OLD PENSION SCHEME (OPS), BUT FOR POLITICAL LEADERS, IT IS A POTENT ELECTION ISSUE THAT THEY ARE PUSHING FOR SHORT-TERM GAINS

By Rohit Parihar

एक देश और एक
विधान,
हो सबकी पेंशन एक
समान।
करो
जय युवा
जय अटेव
एक देश और एक
विधान,
हो सबकी पेंशन एक
समान।
अटेवा, लखनऊ

When Union minister of state (MoS) for finance Bhagwat Karad told the Lok Sabha on February 6 that there is no provision for a refund of the accumulated New Pension Scheme (NPS) corpus to states that have reverted to the Old Pension Scheme (OPS), he was just reiterating the Centre's consistent stand that there will be no return to the old scheme. But it has not discouraged a revolt in the opposition-ruled states. Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot of the Congress was the first to withdraw from the NPS in March 2022, shifting state employees to the OPS (now called OPS-2) retrospectively from the day of their joining the government job. Indeed, in his budget speech on February 10 this year, Gehlot extended the OPS to staff of state-run universities and public sector undertakings.

Two more states—Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand—have stopped contributing to the NPS since, two others—Punjab and Himachal Pradesh—are in the process of doing so and similar return-to-OPS promises are being made by several non-BJP parties in states going to the polls. With government staff up in arms at NPS returns not matching up to those from OPS, party leaders in some BJP-ruled states are also keen to explore “better options”.

Eknath Shinde, chief minister of Maharashtra, where the BJP runs a government in alliance with the Balasahebanchi Shiv Sena (recently pronounced the ‘real’ Shiv Sena by the Election Commission), has of late been signalling the need to take a ‘middle path’ on the OPS versus NPS issue after his BJP allies saw their candidates losing in four of the five legislative council elections in the teachers’ and graduates’ constituencies. The demand to bring back the OPS is snowballing into a major

SUPPORT OPS
SUPPORT OPS
NMOPS
#NPS निजी

FOR OLD PRIVILEGE
Government employees of the Pension Bachao Manch demand restoration of the OPS in Lucknow, Mar. '22

MANEESH AGNIHOTRI

election issue as it affects 8.5 million state and central government employees currently under the NPS. But why are so many averse to the NPS?

WHAT'S BETTER, OPS OR NPS?

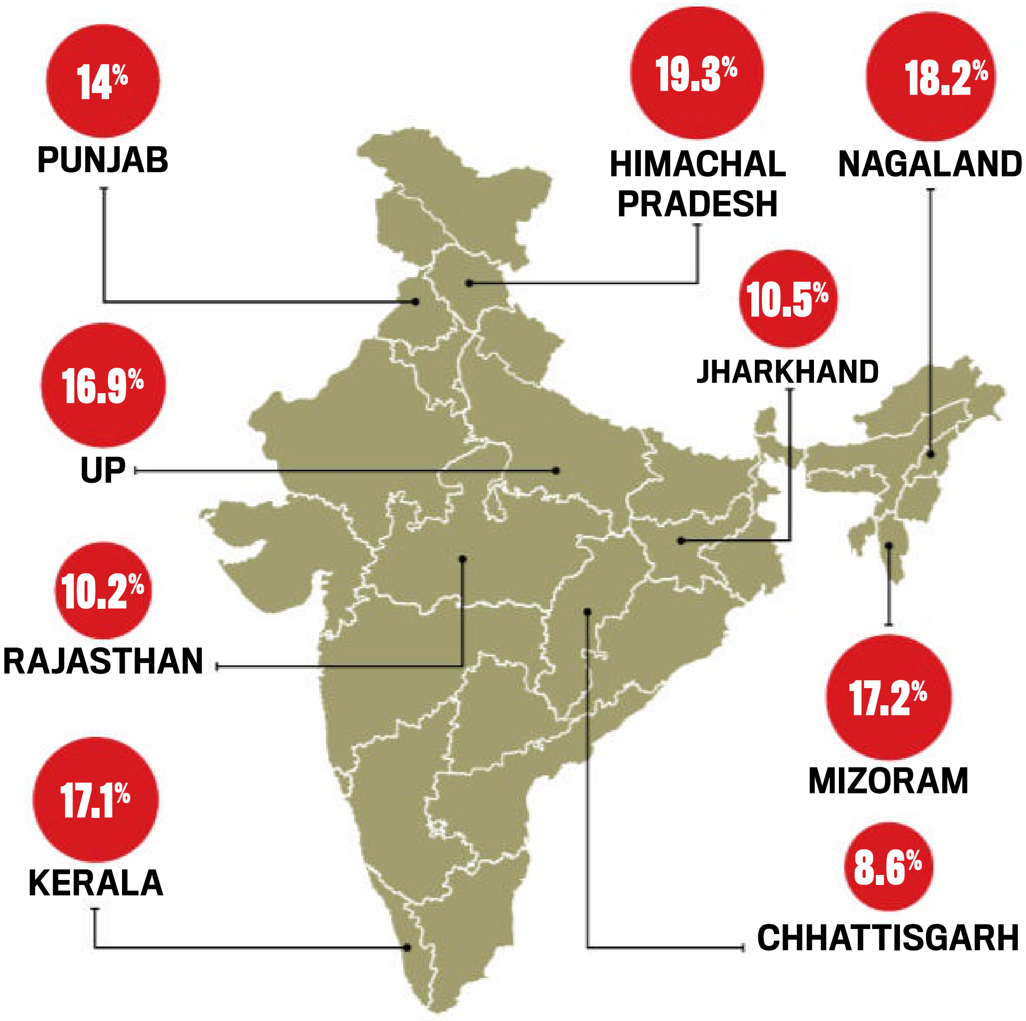
Under the OPS, retired government employees receive 50 per cent of their last-drawn salary as monthly pension, which increases with hikes in dearness allowance rates and salaries as per Pay Commission recommendations. On their death, the spouse gets 30 per cent of the pension. After retirement, an employee gets up to Rs 14 lakh as annuity. Under the OPS, employees do not have to contribute from their salaries to the pension they will draw after retirement. NPS, on the other hand, is a market-linked contribution-based pension scheme that facilitates the accumulation of a pension corpus during one's working life, taking contributions from both the employee and the employer. Under the NPS, employees contribute 10 per cent from their salary every month, and the government pitches in with up to 14 per cent. On superannuation, the employee gets 40 per cent of the amount as annuity, and 60 per cent of this accumulated corpus as a lump sum in a one-time settlement. Employee unions say that unlike the OPS, employees covered under the NPS have no idea about the monthly amount they will get as pension.

THE CLAMOUR HAS PROMPTED A RELOOK AT THE NPS TO OFFER A MINIMUM GUARANTEED PENSION MODEL TO EMPLOYEES

The move back to OPS by some states has both political and economic implications. It works well for short- and mid-term gains as it saves money for the state governments for 12 years or so before returning as a huge liability

PAID UP FOR LIFE

States with the highest pension outgo as proportion of revenue expenditure



REVERTING TO OPS MAY PUT STATES IN FINANCIAL CRISIS. THE PENSION BURDEN WILL KEEP RISING ON ACCOUNT OF THE GROWING NUMBERS AS WELL AS SALARY HIKES FROM PAY COMMISSIONS

around years 2035-40 when, in Rajasthan, for example, against an average of 22,000 state employees, around 35,000 may retire annually. This is also why a fierce debate has been building up on the issue of how OPS defers liability for coming generations. The finance ministry, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the Planning Commission and prominent economists and bureaucrats have warned about the dire effects of a rollback to OPS-2. Lobbyists for the ruling BJP at the Centre have also been active on social media and newspaper editorials, hitting out at the pensionary privileges of retired employees (at the cost of taxpayers), even making it a private sector versus government employee issue, but to no avail. The demand for OPS-2 has now expanded to the railways and central government employees.

The OPS vs NPS battle is being spearheaded by Gehlot who, along with the chief ministers of opposition-ruled Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand, Bhupesh Baghel and Hemant Soren, are now seeking a refund of their corpus (both employees' and states' contributions) lying in the NPS. The CMs of Himachal Pradesh, Sukhvinder Singh Sukhu (Congress), and Punjab, Bhagwant Mann (AAP), have also got their cabinets to pass resolutions in favour of the OPS.

There is a growing belief that in states with a large chunk of government employees, the OPS could be a game-changer as an election issue. The Himachal election is cited as an example where the Congress had made it an election promise. In the end, a one percentage point difference in vote share brought it to power, defeating the incumbent BJP. Maharashtra CM Eknath Shinde and his deputy Devendra Fadnavis, who had softened their stand against the OPS just ahead of the recent MLC polls, may be ruing the fact that they did not commit on the issue. In Karnataka, two BJP MLCs staged a boycott of a legislative council meeting and demanded a move back to the OPS, with ex-MP Ayanur Manjunath asking why elected representatives were not brought under the NPS when it was forced on government employees. BJP national general secretary C.T. Ravi has called for a national consensus by political parties on the OPS issue. Meanwhile, state employees in Tamil Nadu have been sending CM M.K. Stalin constant reminders about restoring OPS being one of his election promises.

WHY OPS IS IN DEMAND

In implementing the NPS, state governments did not amend the service rules to change contractual conditions for existing employees who continued to enjoy the benefits of OPS. The country, therefore, now has two kinds of government employees and pensioners: one lot who will retire year after year until 2040 with OPS benefits and another, appointed after 2004 under NPS, who are angry that they will get much smaller pensions. As employees under NPS climbed the career ladder, they have reached positions where they are able to create pressure groups on the issue. In Rajasthan, MLAs have raised the NPS vs OPS issue in the assembly, citing instances of employees given jobs on compassionate grounds at a later age retiring with NPS pensions of only a few thousand or even a few hundred rupees. Had they retired under OPS, they would have got Rs 4,000-8,000 per month in addition, which is 2-3 times of what they got under NPS.

In September 2020, the Comptroller and Auditor General (CAG), in its performance audit of 15 years of the NPS, highlighted several deficiencies. It said: "The audit could not draw assurance on viability of the fund/ scheme. NPS had not ensured 100 per cent coverage of all eligible offices and employees of the government sector and the envisaged Minimum Assured Return Scheme (MARS) to ensure social security post-retirement and a minimum replacement rate of pension against last pay drawn is not available to the government sector subscribers.”

“The Centre did not pay adequate attention to the NPS, nor did it make it an attractive investment option with tax benefits to compensate for losses versus OPS,” says a senior official at the Union finance ministry. Employee unions had always resisted the NPS format, describing it as a scheme to help the markets more than the employees.

CRITICS’ CONCERN ON OPS

The states planning to revert to OPS, though, must give it serious thought as it could land them in a financial crisis. For one, pension burdens will rise constantly, and not just because of employee numbers but also due to salary hikes from Pay Commissions and DA and such. Rajasthan’s debt to GDP is currently 39.8 per cent and costing it 14.9 per cent as interest. Critics of OPS say it will put states like Punjab and Rajasthan under fiscal stress, further straining their spending limits. Punjab’s debt to GDP is 53.3 per cent, Jharkhand’s is 33 per cent and Chhattisgarh’s 26 per cent. The RBI’s advice is to keep debt under 30 per cent. The 14th Finance Commission report said future liability will adversely affect spending on social welfare.

Critics compare it to states deferring the revision of power tariffs for fear of losing votes, and seeking the Centre’s help when their finances are near collapse. As NITI Aayog vice-chairperson Suman Bery says, “The states do not have money and, ultimately, the Centre will have to bear the burden.” Experts such as former RBI governor Raghuram Rajan and 15th Finance Commission chairman N.K. Singh have all panned the OPS move. Finance secretary T.V. Somanathan, in a post-budget interview, said, “It is one of those cases where you are appearing to save money today while creating huge problems for future governments.”

And if these states are expecting a windfall from a refund of the accrued NPS corpus with the Centre—Rajasthan’s Rs 28,000 crore in deposits has a valuation of Rs 39,000 crore (when the state withdrew in March 2022)—they are in for a long wait. Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman has flatly refused a refund, saying there is no provision for a refund to states in the Pension Fund Regulatory and Development Authority (PFRDA) Act, 2013, and that it can only be passed on to individual pensioners. Gehlot has now threatened to go to the Supreme Court to claim it for the state government.

Even refunds to individuals will not be easy as these are linked to the number of years of service. Even senior employees under NPS will be getting only 20 per cent cash with 80 per cent going to annuity. The Centre has also given a certain part of every state’s corpus to be used as government securities for the state, settling which would be another cumbersome issue.

Two former Union finance secretaries who once headed Rajasthan’s finances are highly critical of Gehlot’s move. Rajiv Mehrishi, who retired as CAG, says NPS is a responsible way to not leave any debt for future generations by taking care of the liability now itself. “It is like working to save the environment for our future generations,” he says while citing his own monthly pension of Rs 1.72 lakh, which he calls “untenable”. Add that to the longevity: there are many now who will earn more in pension than they earned in salaries in their lifetime.

As for criticism on the lower returns in NPS, he says, “It is true that the markets can be unpredictable. But if current returns of eight per cent continue, then someone putting in 36 years of service and retiring at my post can expect al-

A SHAKY NPS?

- **How will withdrawal of states from NPS** affect the fund’s performance? Insiders in NPS trust say they are worried as it will affect growth. As of December 31, 2022, there were 2.35 million subscribers from the central government pool with Assets Under Management (AUM) of Rs 2.47 lakh crore and 5.98 million subscribers from the state governments with AUM of Rs 4.27 lakh crore.
- **The number of new state subscribers declined** by 11 per cent to a four-year low during April-November 2022, with only 285,226 joining compared to 321,255 the year before. The number of new central government subscribers also declined in the April-November period by around 15 per cent to 70,638, from 83,614 during the same period in 2021, largely due to lower recruitment.

OPS VS NPS: KEY DIFFERENCES

OLD PENSION SCHEME

- Under OPS, retired government employees receive 50 per cent of their last drawn salary as monthly pension, which goes up with hikes in dearness allowance and salaries as per Pay Commission recommendations
- On their death, the spouse gets 30 per cent of the amount as pension. After retirement, an employee gets up to Rs 14 lakh as annuity
- Under OPS, employees do not have to contribute from their salaries to the pension that they will draw after retirement

NEW PENSION SCHEME

- NPS is a market-linked contribution-based pension scheme that facilitates the accumulation of a pension corpus during the working life, taking contributions from both employee and employer
- Under NPS, employees contribute 10 per cent from their salary every month, with the government pitching in with up to 14 per cent. On superannuation, the employee gets 40 per cent of the amount as annuity, and 60 per cent of this accumulated corpus as a lump sum in a one-time payment
- Employee unions say that unlike OPS, employees covered under NPS have no idea about the monthly amount they will get as pension

DEMANDS MET
Government employees thank Ashok Gehlot in Jaipur for reinstating OPS, Feb. 25, 2022

most as much in NPS as I get in OPS... and without suddenly burdening the government. However, it's also true that if the markets fall or the fund is badly managed, the pension amounts could shrink." Subhash Chandra Garg, also a former Union finance secretary, calls reverting to OPS a myopic move. He says those who joined work under NPS had a choice of not joining. But then the government could also have implemented NPS for all employees in service, which could have saved the huge amounts spent in the past 19 years on employees under the OPS.

Reformist economists are aghast at the "dangerous trend" of reverting to the OPS. Former Planning Commission vice-chairperson Montek Singh Ahluwalia calls the back-to-OPS plan an "absurd recipe for financial bankruptcy and the biggest *revdi* (alms)". Gehlot retorts by saying, "If the country can progress for 60 years with OPS, then it can progress now as well. Employees have a right to social security after retirement." He points out that in 2021-22, Rajasthan was spending Rs 20,144 crore on pensions under OPS while contributing an extra Rs 2,200 crore a year for present staff under NPS. This concurrent liability of paying 465,000 pensioners under OPS and contributions for the future through NPS had started to pinch, says Gehlot. He feels the state can carry on with the OPS burden without it affecting development.

Gehlot and his additional chief secretary, finance, Akhil Arora, seem to have done their groundwork before implementing OPS-2. Until 2035 or so, any state that chooses OPS over NPS will be making gains of a few thousand crore every year before the hefty liability of numbers kicks in. For example, Rajasthan saves Rs 2,200 crore as its contribution to NPS, which would have doubled given fresh recruitments and increase in salaries. It also retains a similar amount from the employees' contribution, which is now diverted to the general provident fund. Tightening the screws on the states withdrawing from the NPS, the RBI has made it clear that they will lose the benefit of a higher borrowing cap (above 3 per cent of GSDP) that pension scheme contributions had guaranteed. Rajasthan, thus, will see its borrowing cap reduced by around Rs 4,500 crore annually, but it says that instead of borrowing, it can now use the OPS money itself.

However, besides the problematic issue of diverting pension funds for expenses, Rajasthan is not making provisions for how to handle the acc-ruing liability from, say, 2035. After some years, the number of retirees will go down for a few years to about 20,000 a year before rising again, as recruitments went down during most years of NPS before picking up after 2018. "We can handle the OPS-2 future liability, but we must start making provisions for it as soon as possible," says a senior officer.

STALEMATE CONTINUES

So, as the NPS stalemate continues, states are looking at alternatives. Some of them have given employees the option to decide whether they want to go with NPS or OPS, even as Rajasthan has ordered a mandatory shift to OPS-2. Since then, more than 100,000 NPS employees have withdrawn their contributions (some Rs 594 crore in all) and most of it has been deposited with the state government (mandatory for joining OPS-2). It will be deposited in their general provident fund. The state government will ensure that employees get it with interest and that their pension is increased to OPS levels.

The clamour for OPS has also got some pro-NPS experts to take notice of the genuine grievances of employees and thus a long overdue relook at its format in offering a minimum guaranteed pension model. It could be a hybrid of the new and old pension schemes, with the government funding the deficit if net accumulated interest falls below, say, the seven per cent return mark. Another possibility is the pension amount being fixed at not less than half of the last pay drawn with no dearness allowance. Garg and PFRDA chairman Supratim Bandyopadhyay have also suggested such changes. "The objective could be to try and reach the 50 per cent of last pay drawn mark," says Garg.

Gehlot's counter is to point to the financial security and wellbeing of government staff. "We cannot abandon those who helped us build the nation," he says. One thing is for sure, a return to OPS may be a difficult ride, but the NPS too ought to have done better than it has till now. Perhaps the actions of these states will be the harbinger of some drastic changes for the better in the NPS scheme. Millions of state and central government employees will be praying for such an outcome. ■

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PM Narendra Modi was speaking in Lok Sabha

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CHEER CAPTAINS: (4) Raj Chengappa, India Today Group Editorial Director (Publishing), with the winners of the Happiness at Workplace awards: (1) Subiksha Devaraj of Reliance Industries Ltd; (2) Luna Mohanty, Senior Executive Vice-President and Head, People Development, Reliance Industries Ltd; (3) P.T. George, Vice-President, HR & Administration, V-Guard Industries;

WORKPLACE WELLBEING

At the first Happiness at Workplace Summit and Awards, experts and winners come up with the best ways for corporates to spread contentment in the office

By **ANILESH S. MAHAJAN**

On a warm spring morning on February 18, some of the finest minds in the country came together at the first INDIA TODAY-RPG Group Happiness at Workplace Summit and Awards to discuss what defines happiness at workplaces. Is it success? Is it achieving a certain goal, or beating your competitors? Does success make you happy, or is it happiness that makes you successful? These and other such ideas were discussed at the event.

Globally, as the world emerges from the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic and people return to offices, a new kind of normal is in the making. More corporates are embracing a hybrid work culture as employee wellbeing becomes a critical factor. A number of research studies have established that there is a direct link between workplace happiness and productivity. This has even been explained scientifically through the PERMA model, which represents the five core elements of happiness

(5) Anant Goenka, Managing Director, CEAT Ltd; (6) Deependra Singh Kushwah, IAS, Development Commissioner (Industries), Maharashtra; (7) Anand Patil, Director, Systems Engineering, Cisco; (8) Siddharth Srinath, HR Business Leader, Infosys; (9, 10 and 11) Bagisha Jha, Minal Jobanputra and Sheetal Naik of Mahindra & Mahindra Financial Services

Photographs by MILIND SHELTE

> ***"To my mind, it's happiness that takes us to success, not vice versa"***
>
> **ANANT GOENKA**
> *Managing Director, CEAT*

and wellbeing: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishments. Many organisations are now taking steps to cultivate these elements, with some even creating positions like 'Chief Happiness Officer'.

At the summit, Anant Goenka, Managing Director of CEAT, defined success in the words of basketball coach John Wooden—the peace of mind in knowing that you did your best to become the best you are capable of. "To my mind, it's happiness that takes us to success, not vice versa," he said. The event also included a fireside chat on 'The Happy Space: Building a Positive Work Environment', which saw panelists like N.S. Rajan, former CEO, IDFC Foundation and former Group CHRO, Tata Sons, Vistasp Bhagwagar, MD and Principal Architect, Vistasp & Associates, and Pravin Chaturvedi, Chief Meaning Officer, Happiitude, dwell upon how by doing simple things right, workspaces can be transformed into more productive units. This was followed by another freewheeling chat on nurturing a healthy and receptive work attitude. Titled 'Why Workplace Contentment Matters', it featured S. 'Venky' Venkatesh, President, Group HR, RPG Enterprises, Sunita Bhuyan, violin maestro-cum-wellbeing expert, and Harish Shetty, psychiatrist. Raj Chengappa, Editorial Director (Publishing), India Today Group, spoke about ways to pursue happiness at offices and why it's important to acknowledge those who've been able to achieve it, be it through small measures

INDIA TODAY
RPG
HAPPINESS AT WORKPLACE
SUMMIT & AWARDS
N S RAJAN
VISTASP BHAGWAGAR
PRAVIN CHATURVEDI

▲ ‘THE HAPPY SPACE: BUILDING A POSITIVE WORK ENVIRONMENT’

TAKEAWAYS

1

“Four things are important: the organisation must be caring, it should be progressive and inclusive, it must create empowered roles, and employees must feel fulfilled”

N.S. RAJAN
Former CEO, IDFC Foundation and former Group CHRO, Tata Sons

2

“We need to understand that we are dealing with occupants, not physical infrastructure. We need to create workspaces, not workstations”

VISTASP BHAGWAGAR
MD and Principal Architect, Vistasp & Associates

3

“Engagement at the workplace comes when we are more open to each other. When we are more open, we can interact more meaningfully”

PRAVIN CHATURVEDI
Chief Meaning Officer, Happiitude

or bigger milestones.

Notably, IAS officer Deependra Singh Kushwah, who is currently serving as Development Commissioner (Industries), Maharashtra, explained the importance of happiness at government institutions, pointing out that happy policymakers can draft and implement rules more mindfully and efficiently. “The first thing that crosses my mind is, is it the government’s job to make people happy? It certainly is. Our actions and policies must be framed keeping this in mind,” he said.

The toppers of the Happiness at Workplace Awards were decided by market research organisation Marketing and Development Research Associates (MDRA), which came up with a list of nominations and the parameters for ranking organisations. Companies were analysed on the basis of combined scores on the Objective survey and Perceptual survey. After the rankings, a jury meeting consisting of top management representatives from INDIA TODAY and RPG was held to determine the winners in eight categories (see *Happiest of the Happy*).

Two sessions—by Yogesh Chabria, founder, The Happionaire Way, and standup comedian Atul Khatri—brightened the evening. While Chabria spoke about how happiness is linked to core wellbeing, Khatri had everyone in splits with his boardroom jokes, drawing the INDIA TODAY-RPG Group Happiness at Workplace Summit and Awards to a cheerful close. ■

Happiest *of the Happy*

Winners of the first India Today-RPG Happiness at Workplace Awards

BEST RECREATIONAL SPACE/ FACILITY AT WORKPLACE

MICROSOFT INDIA PVT. LTD

WINNER

OTHER NOMINEES

Reliance Industries Ltd

Adobe Systems India Pvt. Ltd

Cisco Systems India Pvt. Ltd

Accenture India Pvt. Ltd

Apple India Pvt. Ltd

AstraZeneca Pharma India Ltd

Pfizer India Ltd

Apollo Tyres Ltd

PARAMETERS

- Having options for recreation like gyms, games, etc.
- Recreational time for employees
- Fun and bonding events, their uniqueness, team-bonding activities
- Percentage of open space available to total office space (for employees bonding at the workplace
- Awards & recognitions

BEST GREEN OFFICE

V-GUARD INDUSTRIES LTD

WINNER

OTHER NOMINEES

Suzlon Energy Ltd

Reliance Industries Ltd

Apple India Pvt. Ltd

Amazon Retail India Pvt. Ltd

ITC Ltd

Apollo Tyres Ltd

Procter & Gamble Health Ltd

Raymond Ltd

Emami Ltd

PARAMETERS

- Having green building certification
- Having ESG certification/ reporting
- Proportion of electricity through renewable sources
- Total budget allocated in FY 2021-22 for putting green plants on office premises
- Types of plants in the organisation
- Awards & recognitions

BEST ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

ADOBE SYSTEMS INDIA PVT. LTD

WINNER

OTHER NOMINEES

Tata Consultancy Services Ltd

Reliance Industries Ltd

Motilal Oswal Financial Services Ltd

Apollo Tyres Ltd

Microsoft Corporation India Pvt. Ltd

Suzlon Energy Ltd

AstraZeneca Pharma India Ltd

Glenmark Pharmaceuticals Ltd

Jindal Stainless Ltd

PARAMETERS

- Having a unique design for the office building, a thematic building design
- Organisations having a state of the art office
- Innovative seating arrangements, having modern furniture
- Efforts undertaken to make workplaces clean
- Heating, circulation of air & oxygen level of the air at workplace
- Awards & recognitions

BEST MENTORSHIP AND CAREER GROWTH PROGRAMMES

CISCO SYSTEMS INDIA PVT. LTD

WINNER

OTHER NOMINEES

Google India Pvt. Ltd

Adobe Systems India Pvt. Ltd

Reliance Industries Ltd

CEAT Ltd

Microsoft Corporation India Pvt. Ltd

Adani Green Energy Ltd

PVR Ltd

AstraZeneca Pharma India Ltd

Procter & Gamble Health Ltd

PARAMETERS

- Types of mentorship programmes
- Employees promoted
- Positions filled through internal mobility
- Budget allocated for coaching, counselling & mentoring
- Amount spent on learning and development programmes for employees
- Awards & recognitions

BEST HEALTH AND WELLNESS PROGRAMMES

INFOSYS LTD WINNER

OTHER NOMINEES

- Reliance Industries Ltd
- Microsoft Corporation India Pvt. Ltd
- Amazon Retail India Pvt. Ltd
- Apple India Pvt. Ltd
- Cisco Systems India Pvt. Ltd
- Pfizer India Ltd
- Godfrey Phillips India Ltd
- AstraZeneca Pharma India Ltd

PARAMETERS

- Having frequent wellness sessions (including yoga and gym sessions)
- Offering gym memberships to employees
- Health check-ups for employees; frequency of health check-ups
- Access to onsite health services such as physicians, therapists, etc.
- Types of health, wellness, safety and prevention activities for employees
- Efforts for employees' mental wellness
- Medical/ health insurance (in terms of employees' parents) and type of insurance
- Awards & recognitions

BEST WORK-LIFE BALANCE PROGRAMME AT WORKPLACE

GOOGLE INDIA PVT. LTD WINNER

OTHER NOMINEES

- Microsoft Corporation India Pvt. Ltd
- Amazon Retail India Pvt. Ltd
- Adobe Systems India Pvt. Ltd
- Apple India Pvt. Ltd
- Procter & Gamble Health Ltd
- Capgemini Technology Services India Ltd
- Jindal Stainless Ltd
- Sun Pharma Advanced Research Company Ltd
- Pfizer India Ltd

PARAMETERS

- Flexibility in working hours (percentage of people getting flexibility in working hours)
- Holiday camps and picnics organised
- Maternity leaves
- Paternity leaves
- Sabbaticals
- Awards & recognitions

HAPPIEST WORKPLACE FOR WOMEN

MAHINDRA & MAHINDRA FINANCIAL SERVICES LTD WINNER

OTHER NOMINEES

- Amazon Retail India Pvt. Ltd
- Accenture India Pvt. Ltd
- AstraZeneca Pharma India Ltd
- Procter & Gamble Health Ltd
- CEAT Ltd
- Cognizant Technology Solutions India Pvt. Ltd
- Apple India Pvt. Ltd
- Tata Consultancy Services Ltd
- VIP Industries Ltd

PARAMETERS

- HR policies to make female employees feel safe and happy
- Safe commuting facilities
- Special leaves for women
- Flexibility given to women (work timings, benefits, best practices that the company is following for special caregivers)
- Percentage of women in decision-making/ leadership roles
- Female attrition rate
- Hiring practices to ensure there are women at the workplace (women to be in selection panel)
- Awards & recognitions

BEST EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT PROGRAMMES

RELIANCE INDUSTRIES LTD WINNER

OTHER NOMINEES

- Google India Pvt. Ltd
- JK Cement Ltd
- PepsiCo India Holdings Pvt. Ltd
- Microsoft Corporation India Pvt. Ltd
- Amazon Retail India Pvt. Ltd
- Godfrey Phillips India Ltd
- Procter & Gamble Health Ltd
- Infosys Ltd
- Mahindra & Mahindra Financial Services Ltd

PARAMETERS

- Satisfaction score
- Loyalty score
- Advocacy score
- Increments, timely promotions, clear path for employees in terms of work and progression
- Availability of an Internal Complaints Committee for sexual harassment and grievance redressal
- Availability of family-friendly policies
- Employee attrition rate in the organisation
- Awards & recognitions

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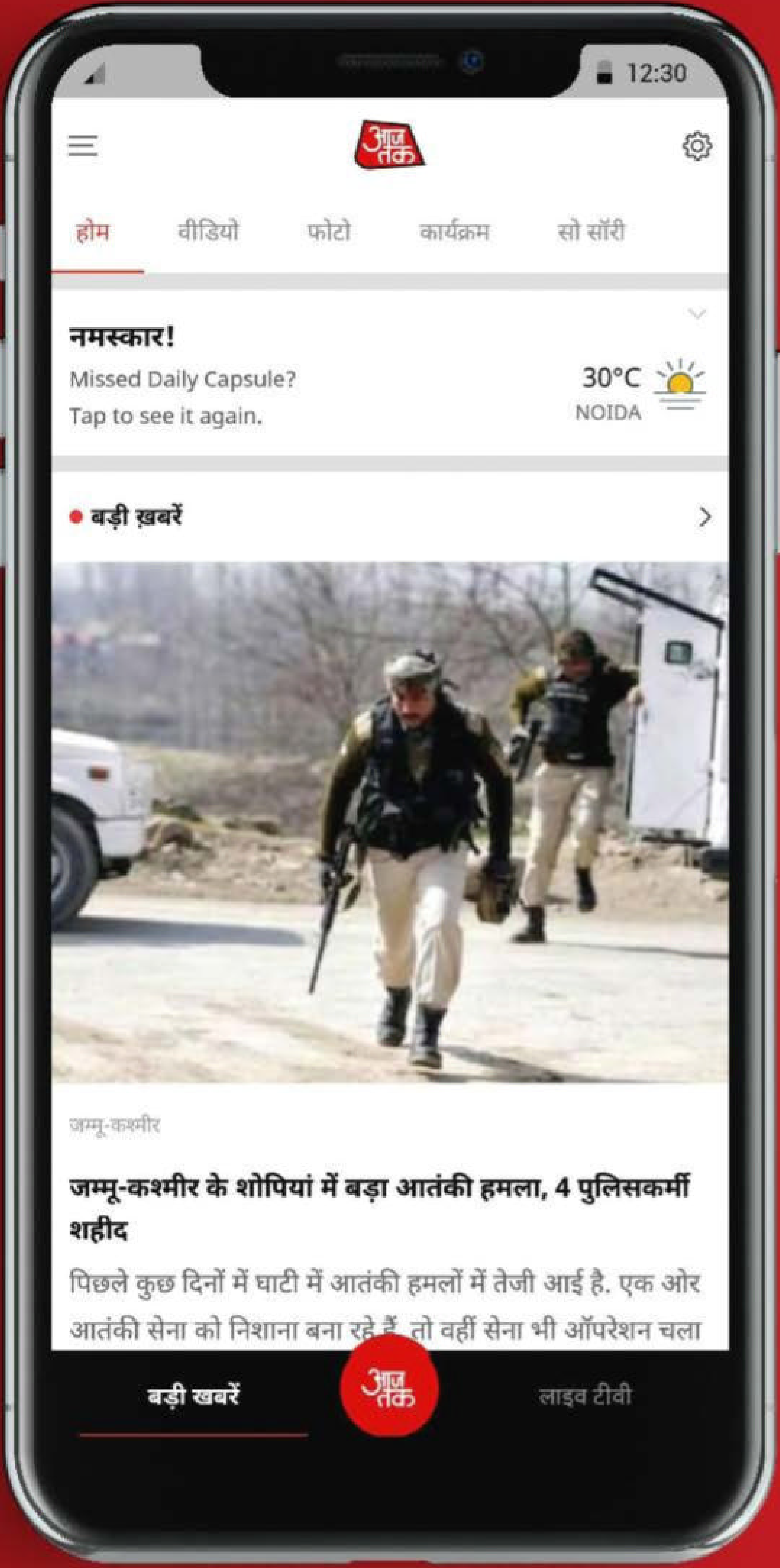

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लाइव टीवी

▲ **‘WHY WORKPLACE CONTENTMENT MATTERS’**

TAKEAWAYS

❶
“Wellness is all about awareness. There are no negative emotions. Respect emotions as they are... Mental health is connected to compassion and empathy”

HARISH SHETTY
Psychiatrist

❷
“One of the ways to promote happiness is not creating additional unhappiness. One way to do so is to have a strong anti-harassment culture at the workplace”

S. ‘VENKY’ VENKATESH
President, Group HR, RPG Enterprises

❸
“A workplace is like an orchestra where employees need to be happy and composed professionals. Performance and productivity are byproducts of happiness”

SUNITA BHUYAN
Violin maestro and wellbeing expert

YOGESH CHABRIA
Founder, The Happionaire Way

“IF THERE’S ONE THING YOU CAN DO, START MEDITATING. IT MAKES YOU PRODUCTIVE, CONFIDENT AND ALSO HELPS WITH YOUR HEALTH”

ATUL KHATRI
Comedian

“PEOPLE WONDER HOW I QUIT A CEO JOB AND BECAME A COMEDIAN. BUT THAT IS WHAT HAPPINESS IS ALL ABOUT—FOLLOWING YOUR DREAM”

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GULMOHAR: SHARMILA TAGORE'S WARM COMEBACK PG 64

SURESH MENON: MAN OF MANY WORLDS PG 67

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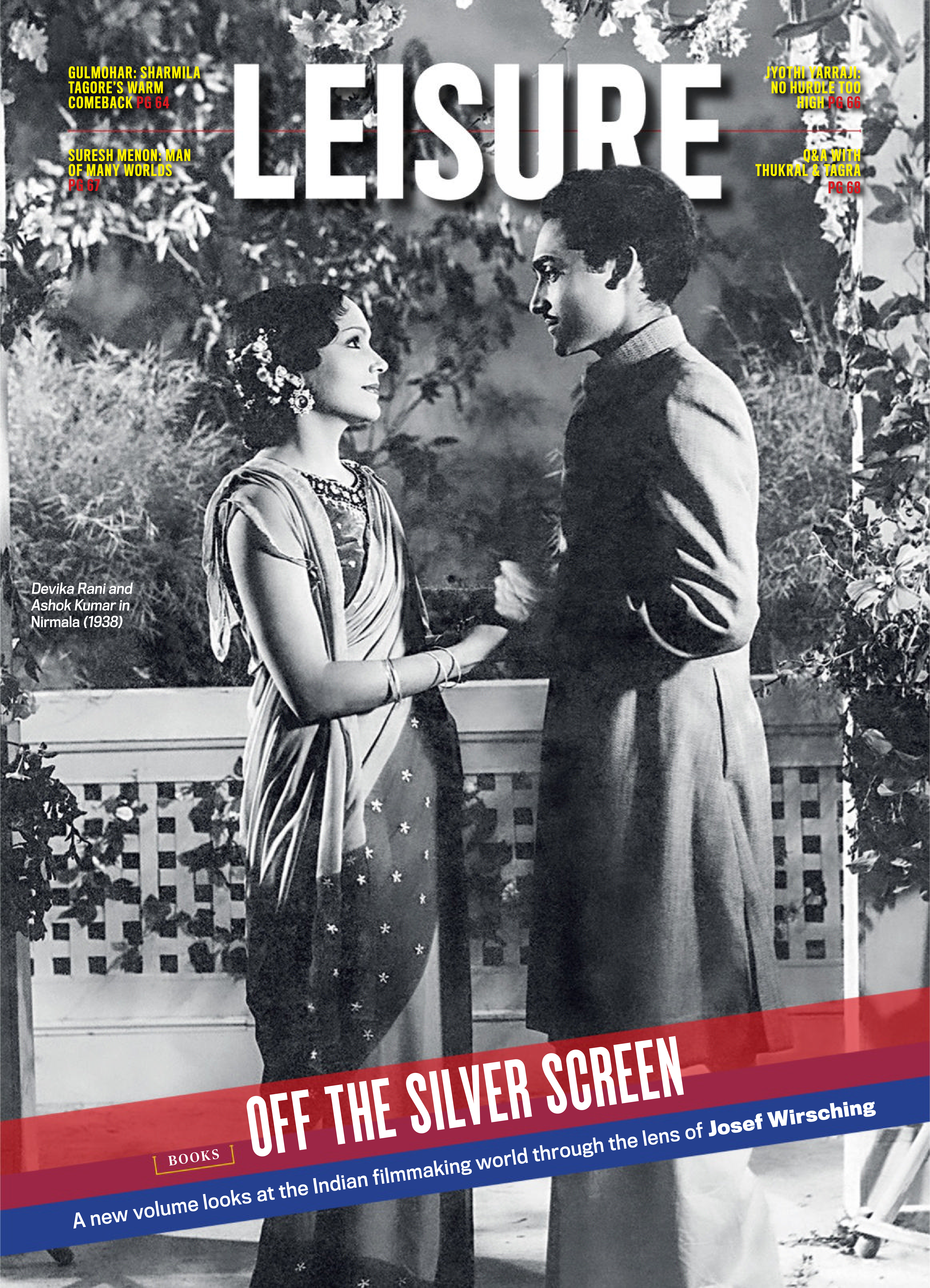

Devika Rani and Ashok Kumar in Nirmala *(1938)*

BOOKS

OFF THE SILVER SCREEN

A new volume looks at the Indian filmmaking world through the lens of **Josef Wirsching**

BYGONE YEARS Devika Rani and other actors during the shoot of *Jawani Ki Hawa* (1935); (bottom) Josef Wirsching with his camera in Jaipur

When it comes to literature on Indian cinema, cinematographers have been overlooked in favour of actors, filmmakers and musicians. Which is why *Bombay Talkies: An Unseen History of Indian Cinema* is a rare, treasured volume, for it offers cinephiles a glimpse of filmmaking through the gaze of a cinematographer: German lensman Josef Wirsching, who worked with the iconic Bombay Talkies studio from its inception in 1934 until its dissolution in 1954. For editor Debashree Mukherjee, associate professor, Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies, Columbia University, it made anchoring this project all the more enticing. “A focus on cinematographers is both overdue and can tell us some very surprising things about the history of Indian cinema,” she wrote from New York. “Our goal was to publicly present, and critically analyse, Josef Wirsching’s contributions to Indian cinema. At the same time, unpack the historical significance of this astonishing archive of photographs that he has left behind.”

One has to thank Wirsching’s son, Peter, and his grandsons, Josef and Georg, for preserving the photographs and negatives for nearly eight decades as the family moved across India. The Alkazi Foundation later stepped up to restore the collection digitally. The black-and-white photographs include umpteen film stills but it’s the behind-the-scenes shots capturing filmmaking in pre-Independence India and candid takes that stand out.

Unsurprisingly, the stunning Devika Rani, co-founder of the studio alongside her husband and lawyer-turned-actor Himanshu Rai, and also the studio’s leading lady, dominates the pages, be it her turn in *Jawani Ki Hawa* (1935) or *Achhut Kannya* (1936). Also seen is her co-star, an awkward-looking Ashok Kumar, who started off as a laboratory assistant with the studio. Kumar’s thespian career was a result of Rani eloping with Najmul Hussain, the original actor of *Jeevan Naiya* (1936), which led to Hussain’s dismissal. Other eminent subjects include German director Franz Osten, classical dancer Madame Azurie, producer Sashadhar Mukherjee and sound engineer Savak Vacha.

At the forefront is Wirsching. Georg’s foreword details his grandfather’s internment in the prisoner-of-war camps in British India during the

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ENTERTAINMENT

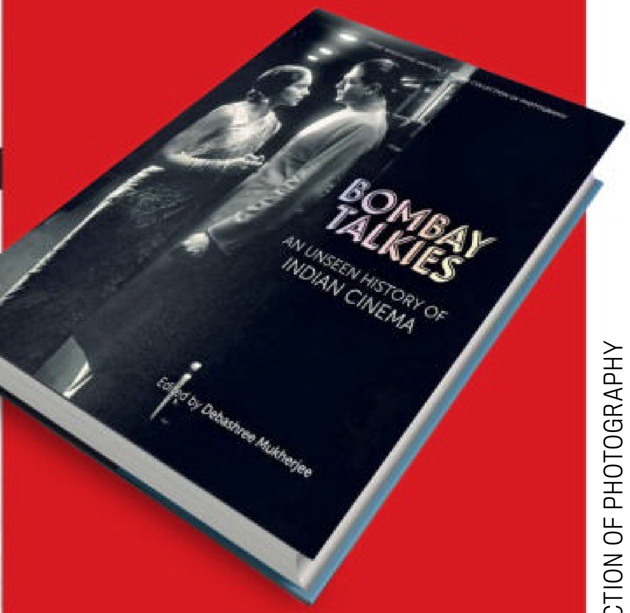
A WARM COMEBACK

Veteran actress* Sharmila Tagore *talks about her OTT debut with* Gulmohar *and why the character of Kusum spoke to her

When filmmaker Rahul V. Chittella locked in on a house to shoot his directorial debut *Gulmohar*, all he needed to tell the owner was the name of his leading lady: Sharmila Tagore. Says Chittela, “He was eight years old when he got a photograph with Sharmilaji on the front lawn. He lost it. All he wanted was a new photograph with her. That’s how we got the house.” *Gulmohar* premieres on Disney+Hotstar on March 3.

For the past decade or so, Tagore has largely avoided the spotlight, opting for a quiet, independent life in New Delhi. When Chittella came to her with the character of Kusum in 2019, she had a change of heart. “She spoke to me. She is my age and close to what I am in real life,” says Tagore. “There is so much warmth [in the script]. Under one roof, there are many parallel stories, and every character is rounded.”

Gulmohar sees Tagore play a matriarch whose decision to sell the family home and live independently


BOMBAY TALKIES
AN UNSEEN HISTORY OF INDIAN CINEMA
Edited by Debashree Mukherjee

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An Unseen History of Indian Cinema
Edited by Debashree Mukherjee
MAPIN
₹3,950; 192 pages

Photos courtesy: MAPIN PUBLISHING, AHMEDABAD IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE ALKAZI COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Second World War, which resulted in a forced hiatus, and how the Nazification of Germany played a role in Josef's resolve to move and make a home in India. "Bombay Talkies offered Wirsching the professional status and creative freedom that was not possible in Germany's crowded and politicised film scene." It further helped that the studio was focused on making socially relevant dramas with a progressive streak.

Essays by Majumdar, Sudhir Mahadevan and Rachel Dwyer analyse Wirsching's work in India, which began as early as 1925 with *The Light of Asia*, as well as the impact he had on Indian cinematography, particularly through his mentoring of camera and lighting crews in the studio. "Bombay cinema from the 1930s to the 1950s reveals a strong influence of German Expressionism, and Josef Wirsching played a pioneering role in popularising this stylised film form," says Mukherjee. "The Expressionist vocabulary is strongly imprinted in Wirsching's lighting designs and compositions." They are most visible in Bombay Talkies' debut film, *Jawani Ki Hawa*, and later in *Mahal* (1949), a gothic thriller starring Madhubala and Kumar. Wirsching's other credits include *Dil Apna Aur Preet Parai* (1960) and the classic *Pakeezah* (1972). He died before *Pakeezah's* filming was completed in 1967, but is believed to have been largely responsible for the camerawork on the film's iconic songs "Inhi Logo Ne", "Chalte Chalte" and "Thare Rahiyo".

THE COLLECTION HAS MANY STILLS BUT IT'S BEHIND-THE-SCENES SHOTS AND CANDIDS THAT STAND OUT

Mahadevan writes about the "remarkable diversity" of Wirsching's collection, which includes genres of photography, be it images taken during location scouting or production of films. It's the latter that history buffs are likely to study to get a sense of filmmaking and the mood on sets in the days of yore. One sees a picture of a light assistant resting against a reflector, another of Rani lighting a cigarette during a break, and many of Wirsching at work. Dwyer highlights Wirsching's role in making the faces of Rani, Madhubala and Meena Kumari iconic through the use of light and shadow.

For Mukherjee, it's a regret that despite the fame of Bombay Talkies studio, the films made by it are still unseen by many. This book, she hopes, will make readers seek out those films and "shake some of our misconceptions about our shared cinematic past". ■

Suhani Singh

For **MANOJ BAJPAYEE**, working with Sharmila Tagore was an opportunity to learn from a legend

SUPRIYA KANTAK

sends ripples through the family. The script's exploration of what constitutes a family and home now resonated with Tagore, who herself grew up in a joint family. "The more pillars in your life, the more sustenance you get," she says. "So much is lost in a nuclear family. Today's pace of living doesn't allow us to be together."

The multi-generational family drama also stars Manoj Bajpayee as Kusum's eldest son. For Bajpayee, working with Tagore was an opportunity to learn from a legend, much like he did with Amitabh Bachchan in the 2001 film *Aks*.

"What is so great about these people is that they are observers of time and of self. She has seen the industry changing and the definition of hero and heroine changing, but you don't take time to adapt," he says. "If you are self-obsessed and living in past glory, then it becomes difficult for you to come out of it and work with the new generation."

The mood in a room still shifts when Tagore, who is 78, walks in. On a recent February afternoon at Hyatt Centric hotel in Mumbai, Tagore, dressed in a floral print sari with her grey hair cut short, had everyone gushing. The awe and respect were evident on the faces of Chittele and Bajpayee, too. "She has this childlike curiosity," says Chittella. The actress beamed as Bajpayee said his career's highlight was to waltz with her in a scene.

Making her OTT debut, Tagore hopes that *Gulmohar* will connect with families. "You can make your islands in your home also. Even if you're not physically together, if the bond is there and you are close to each other, you can still be together. The need is not to talk so much but to hear each other". ■

Suhani Singh

MUSIC

A New Set of Strings

Former tennis star **Somdev Devvarman** puts on his singing hat with his solo album *One Three Two*

Around the same time that Somdev Devvarman began tennis lessons, he also took guitar classes. Starting at the age of nine, Devvarman recalls, "I took lessons for like three months and then tennis took over." Even as tennis took him around the world and made him a sports idol, Devvarman retired in 2017 and turned his focus to being on broadcast TV and coaching as well. The same year, he and a friend went to see UK pop artist Ed Sheeran perform in Washington D.C.

Devvarman recalls how Sheeran spoke about encouraging every closeted musician to "get out there and play". It struck a chord with him, and he wrote his first song, 'New Man', that same night, which he says put into words his feelings about leaving behind tournaments and the rigour of training, but not in a glorified way. In a breezy yet resolute way, Devvarman sings about being in the midst of a different energy and how something is missing, but eventually admitting that it's time to let go. He adds, "Once that song was complete, in terms of structuring and arrangements, I found that to be fun. And then I just kept going."

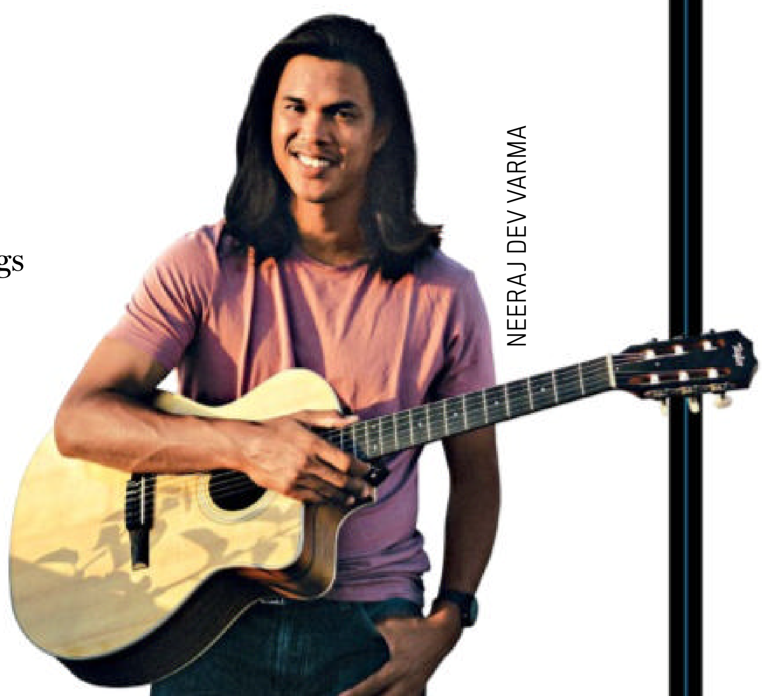
Devvarman wrote five songs in that same week, and years later—in 2023 to be precise—he brought in his 38th birthday on February 13 by releasing his debut solo album *One Three Two* via the Chennai artist platform Original Dog. Thirteen songs are spread across side A and side B, as a nod to Devvarman's love for cassettes. Influenced by the likes of Dave Matthews, Frightened Rabbit and Jack Johnson, *One Three Two* is a lazy day listen that isn't preachy as much as it is about friendly advice and wisdom, with a warm tone. But that's just for the length of the first seven tracks on side A.

The tone changes towards the end of side A with "One More Night" and brings in fuller, gradually building rock songs like "Different Kind of Day" and "Below the Mistletoe", which he wrote for his wife. Elsewhere, songs like "The Seeker" are steeped in Devvarman's philosophical thoughts, and he touches upon autism and socio-political strife in "Ode to Justice". He has not tried to force perfection as much as he has aimed for honesty. "There were not really any very wrong answers ... I felt the kind of artistic freedom that I've never felt in my life. That was one of the most fulfilling things that I've ever done," says Devvarman.

In *One Three Two*, Devvarman has tried not to force perfection as much as he's aimed for honesty

It's the start of a new chapter with *One Three Two* and Devvarman says he'll be promoting the record more, plus taking on performances. Being an independent artist, he says, is a learning curve. "There are many things I know I can do better, but I'm enjoying the process." ■

Anurag Tagat



NEERAJ DEV VARMA

NO HURDLE TOO HIGH

SPORTS

WITH HER SILVER WIN IN ASIAN INDOORS THIS MONTH, **ACE ATHLETE JYOTHI YARRAJI** CONTINUES TO BREAK HER OWN RECORDS

Suresh Menon has for years been known for his cricket stories in *Deccan Herald* and *Indian Express*, as editor of *Wisden India Almanack*, and as an author of books on cricket. In *Why Don't You Write Something I Might Read?*, he explores his other interest: English literature.

Through some brief 40 essays, interspersed with two-page "short takes", Menon discusses New Journalism (Tom Wolfe was "a cult figure rather than the father of a school of writing"), New Age Writing (Is Paulo Coelho "merely Chetan Bhagat in a different accent?"), and book reviews ("The sensible procedure for a critic," as W.H. Auden says, "is to keep silent about works which he believes to be bad"). He also covers crime, sex, and the writer as an alcoholic.

There are interesting nuggets strewn throughout the slim volume: V.S. Naipaul stuns Menon with his photographic memory, recalling the fish curry he ate at

Until January this year, Jyothi Yarraji had never competed in the 60-metre indoors hurdles event. When she stepped out on the track at the Aarhus Sprint'n'Jump in Denmark, she was excited to simply soak it all in. “It's a lot more aggressive and intense—nothing like running outdoors. Every single move counts, a small mistake and it's over,” says Yarraji, 23. The inexperience hardly mattered. In the very first race, she smashed Gayathri Govindaraj's national record (8.34 seconds) from 2016 after clocking 8.20 seconds. Since then, she has progressively bettered her own mark on four other occasions.

On February 12, she ran her last race at the Asian Indoor Athletics Championships in Nur-Sultan in Kazakhstan. Her timing of 8.13 seconds wasn't just her fastest time yet—it also won her a silver behind Japan's Masumi Aoki (8.01 seconds). “I managed to get another personal best during the heats, so I thought to myself why not go even faster. The focus was on running intelligently, the medal was never on my mind,” she says. “It was the first time I held the Indian flag on the podium. It has been my dream.”

Jyothi Yarraji broke **the national record for 100-metre** hurdles on four occasions in 2022

Chasing records is becoming a routine of sorts for Yarraji ever since she took to athletics during her school days in Visakhapatnam. Things were difficult back home. Her father is employed as a security guard and her mother works part-time as a cleaner at a hospital. But she continued to focus on the track life, and the effort paid off when she burst onto the scene last year. Yarraji broke the national record for 100-metre hurdles on four occasions in 2022. She ended the year on a high, clocking 12.82 seconds at the National Open Athletics Championship in Bengaluru, the first Indian woman to go under 13 seconds.

This year, she wants to focus on an Olympic qualification for 2024, as well as the World Championships and the Asian Games. India's only medal at any of these events in Yarraji's discipline was won by Manjit Walia at the Bangkok Asian Games in 1966 (at the time, it was 80m instead of today's 100m).

In December last year, the Athletics Federation of India announced 13.63 seconds as the qualification mark for the Asian Games in Hangzhou. Going by her performance last season and her current form, Yarraji looks good to make the cut.

Over the past year, she has worked on her speed and strength with coach James Hillier at the Reliance Foundation Odisha High Performance Centre. She credits him for the positivity he has brought to her life. “Sketching has also helped me a lot. It allows me to express myself and helps release a lot of emotions.” And, perhaps, break records at will. ■

Shail Desai

BOOKS

MAN OF MANY WORLDS

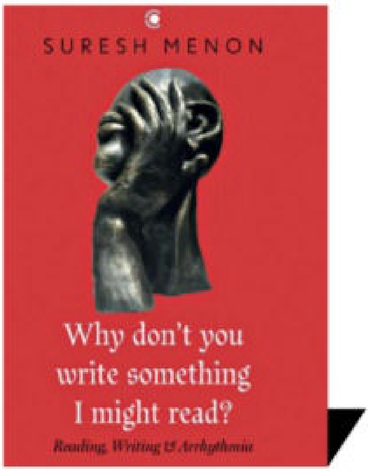
In his new book, **Suresh Menon** takes a break from sports writing to pursue his other interests: literature, art, philosophy

his house many years earlier; Ved Mehta detests the appellation “blind writer”; among sportsmen whose byline appeared in newspaper columns, only Bishen Singh Bedi and Sunil Gavaskar did not use ghostwriters. H.G. Wells, Arthur Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, Perry Mason and others march through the book, but Menon offers little insight of his own and instead quotes other writers. The result is a collection of dry, Wikipedia-style essays.

The interesting parts, naturally, are when Menon talks about sports and Bengaluru's bookshops. He describes Eduardo Galeano writing about Pele (“When he executed a free kick, his opponents in the wall wanted to turn around to face the net so as not to miss the goal”). As editor of *Wisden*, he remembers haranguing Pico Iyer into writing 1,500 words about cricket. Talking about the hours he spent at his favourite Premier Bookstore in Bengaluru, Menon recalls that he always took the same route inside, starting with new arrivals, then moving to science and art sections and ending up in the sports section just past the eccentric owner T.S. Shanbhag.

Great sportswriting, he says, transcends balls and bats to display the qualities of literature: incision, wit, force and vision, suffused with style and substance. Muhammad Ali inspired some of the best writing on boxing. Did early sportswriters think of themselves as literary figures? The first cricket writer was a woman, Mary Russel Mitford, who wrote extensively on rural life. “I doubt whether there will be any scene in the world more delightful than a cricket match,” she wrote. Ernest Hemingway, Norman Mailer, Daniel Defoe, George Plimpton, all wrote great sports stories. Literary people writing about a populist activity, Menon says, could not resist the temptation to force life lessons into their sportswriting. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't. ■

G. Krishnan


SURESH MENON
Why don't you write something I might read?
Reading, Writing & Arrhythmia

WHY DON'T YOU WRITE SOMETHING I MIGHT READ? Reading, Writing and Arrhythmia
by Suresh Menon
CONTEXT
₹499; 275 pages

EARS TO THE GROUND

Artist duo ***Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra****, who unveiled 'Arboretum' this art season, on their work, technology and what keeps them together*

RAJWANT RAWAT

Q. What was most memorable for you in the recently concluded Art Fair?
The meaningful conversations and ideas exchanged were the highlights. The Art Fair was in a fortnight when so much was happening in the city, and we were glad to host our exhibition around a time when numerous curators and art aficionados were visiting.

Q. Why an artist as a gardener in an arboretum, and not an artist as an explorer in a jungle wilderness?
Much as we wander, our explorations involve the discipline of waking up and reaching the studio. This injects us with hope in what we build, a determination to nurture ideas. It's all with an optimism that someday, they may bear fruit!

Q. You have been working together for 20 years. How do you surprise each other?
The idea of working together is a commitment to building together, to values to be unlearned and evolved, to ideas only some of which may take form. We try to stay like a child within...

Q. Where do you keep returning to (other than your studio) for creative rejuvenation?
We mostly travel to see art, and to visit studios that are pushing boundaries.

Q. What's your ritual for disconnecting from technology?
We spend a lot of our lives in the studio, manoeuvring around different materials, navigating and experiencing each day as handmade and machine-made.

Q. You've painted, sculpted, directed video and made interactive games. Which medium calms you the most?
"Breathe with each leaf you paint" is an idea that animates us. We use this technique to paint and meditate, to keep us aligned when change is all around.

with Bhaskar Kowshik

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THE GOOD LIFE

INDIA TODAY SPICE

FEBRUARY 2023

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SPIRITS
THE BEST NEW BARS

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

WITH JANUARY'S BRISTLING COLD FINALLY BEHIND US AND the searing summer sun still a distant threat, spring is in the air in all its balmy glory–perfect for all things outdoors: languorous brunches, moonlit picnics, wine trails, hiking trips and of course, it's the country's unofficial convertible season. While a lot of luxury cars come with bragging rights, it's the rarefied world of sports cars, and convertibles in particular, that truly capture the spirit of spring. Apart from nailing the looks and the drive, the Mercedes-AMG E53 Cabriolet's interior simply writes its own tribute. At a price tag of ₹1.3 crore, it has all thew bells and whistles to match its six-cylinder magic. After all, what's the point of fame and fortune unless they come with toys that remind the world to envy you. The accompanying swagger, of course, is part of the factory settings.

From vintage to classy and sexy to muscular, this issue of *Spice* springs some of the sleekest wheels in being launched in the market this year, including legacy giants such as Mercedes, BMW and Audi. Of course, the prancing horse offers its model, the Ferrari Purosangue, the brand's first SUV. For those who can't get enough of raw performance, Mercedes' offerings include the Mercedes Benz AMG SL, Mercedes GLC, and the Mercedes EQE.

While we were impressed with the sporty S-line styling package that Audi has reserved for its Audi Q3 Sportback, it is the striking Turbo Blue Paint shade exclusive to this version that captured its essence. We're not the type to judge a book by its cover alone, and we tested the quattro performance of two Audi cars—RS e-tron GT and the RS 5 Sportback—on conditions that don't quite classify as your everyday drive. *Spice* signed up for the highly-coveted Audi ice-driving experience in the Austrian town of Seefeld in the Tyrol region.

But driving exercises such as dynamic drifting, oversteering or understeering are not for everyone; so *Spice* also explored the more universal charms of a road trip, albeit with a slight difference. Caravan Tourism allows you the luxury and comfort of freewheeling down the highway ensconced in a souped-up RV (recreational vehicle). After all, modern day caravans pack in many conveniences from swanky wooden interiors, to large sofas, smart TVs,a miniature kitchen and a mini-bedroom with a queen-sized bed and even mood lighting. Watching Netflix on the go, sipping on a wine spritzer while tucked into bed does seem extra idyllic when the journey is the destination.

While our RV trip took us from Delhi to Jodhpur, *Spice* also made a whirlwind trip to the newly-opened Sawantwadi Palace Boutique Art Hotel, currently the only royal residence-hotel in Maharashtra. This heritage property guards palace recipes just as fiercely as it does its collection of heritage art forms such as ganjifa paintings and lacquerware.

Toasting classics has long been a *Spice* imprimatur, and our heady journey came full circle with a list of the newest bars around the country that celebrate innovation, panache, and unwavering hospitality. India has finally risen to the occasion, grabbing eight of the top seats at the last Asia's 50 Best Bars. Scoring on both the surprise and the delight quotient, this is the golden hour for Indian mixology.

Here's to raising the bar!

(Aroon Purie)

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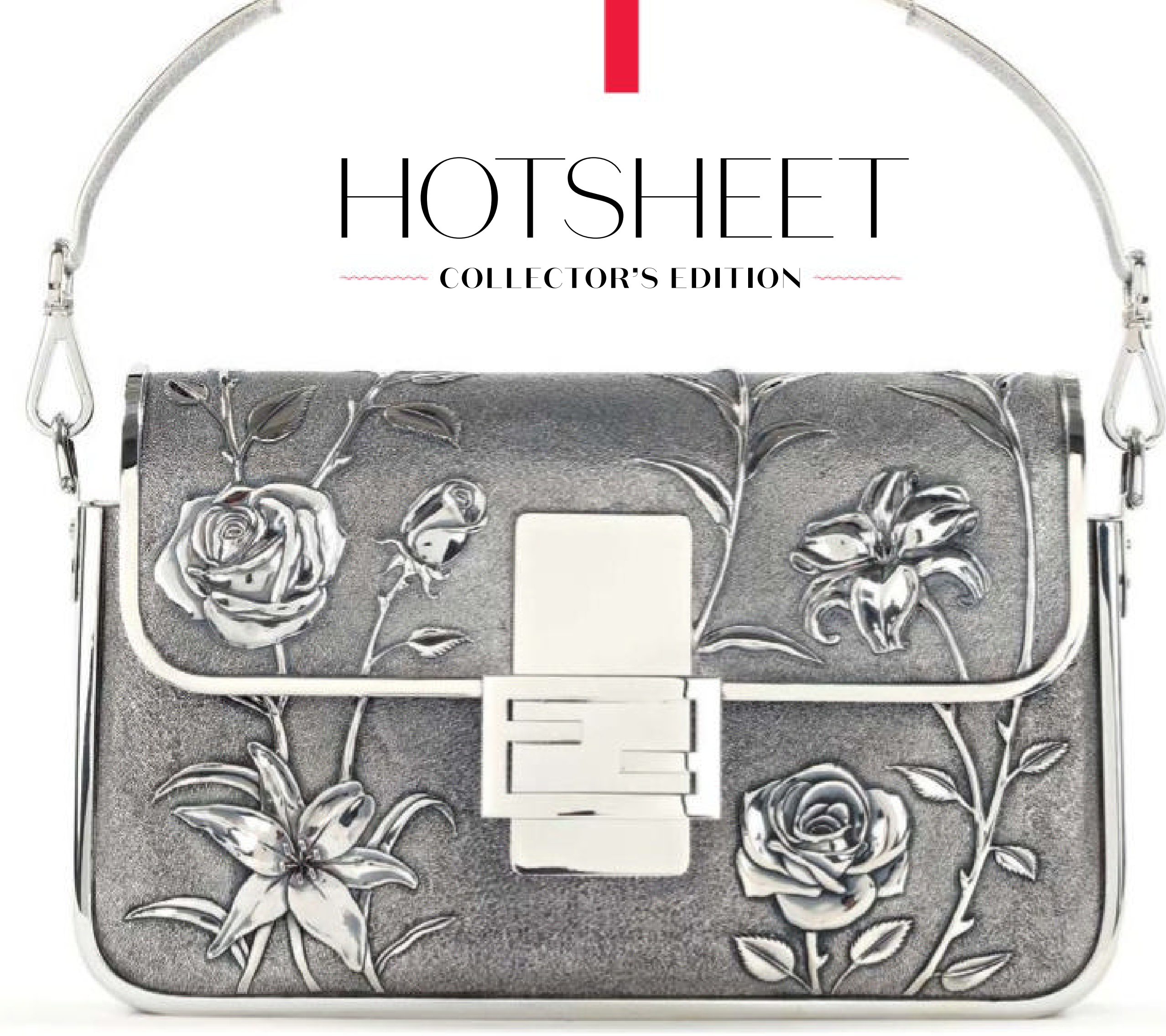

Argent Appeal

Anniversaries present the perfect moment to conflate ceremony and celebration. And in the case of FENDI's 25th anniversary of its Baguette bag, it is a celebration of craftsmanship and artistry too. To commemorate this momentous silver anniversary, FENDI and Tiffany & Co. joined forces to pay homage to the iconic bag created by Silvia Venturini Fendi in 1997. Famously named after its attitude and worn under the arm like a baguette loaf, the Baguette bag has aquired cult status as a cultural phenomenon that presented the fashion industry with an archetype of style.

Through its FENDI Baguette 'hand in hand' initiative, the Italian luxury house partnered with Tiffany 'Makers'–artisans at the famed Tiffany & Co. hollowware workshop in Rhode Island–to craft an exclusive Tiffany Baguette bag in sterling silver. The artisanal masterpiece is an homage to heritage, and took a group of Tiffany Makers over a period of four months to make. The bag is engraved with lilies, the national flower of Italy, and roses, the state flower of New York. While the form of the bag is crafted to specific size and shape, the floral design on the front was chased–an age-old silversmithing technique used to sculpt the silver by hand–into the sterling silver. The bag weighs approximately 2.3 kg and was created over a span of four months with over 250 hours of labour.

Price on request; **Availability** Brand boutiques and fendi.com

By Chumki Bharadwaj

SIMPLY ICONIC
Tiffany Baguette bags are available in smooth leather, shiny croco leather with diamonds and silk satin

HOTSHEET

GIFTING

ELECTIMUSS
AUSTER

Simply Divine

Imagine the lingering scent of Mediterranean lemon groves, laced with sweet geraniums, star anise and cloves that transform into an earthy base of patchouli, ambergris and cedar with leathery undertones. Can't imagine? Spritz the Electimus Auster instead to channel the charming complexity of light and dark. **Price** ₹16,400 (100 ml); **Availability** scentido.com

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L'HUILE ORIGINALE

Winsome Glory

The perfect antidote to winter dryness, the luxurious Kerastase Elixir Ultime L'Huile Originale is a leave-in serum to lock-in nourishment and shine. Boasting a blend of precious hair oils–Marula, Camellia and Argan–this takes you from frizz to fuss-free with a couple of pumps. What's more, there is no greasy build-up either.

Price ₹2,900 for 100ml; **Availability** www.kerastase.in

Gotu Kola Dew
82°E

Skin Reset

Multitasking is an enviable skill, especially in a skin care product. For those, who need workable shortcuts to an elaborate skincare regime will do well with the Gotu Kola Dew self-care brand 82°E. The revitalising toner serum is infused with gotu kola and niacinamide and serves as a toner and serum in one lightweight, fast-absorbing formula to restore the skin's natural barrier.

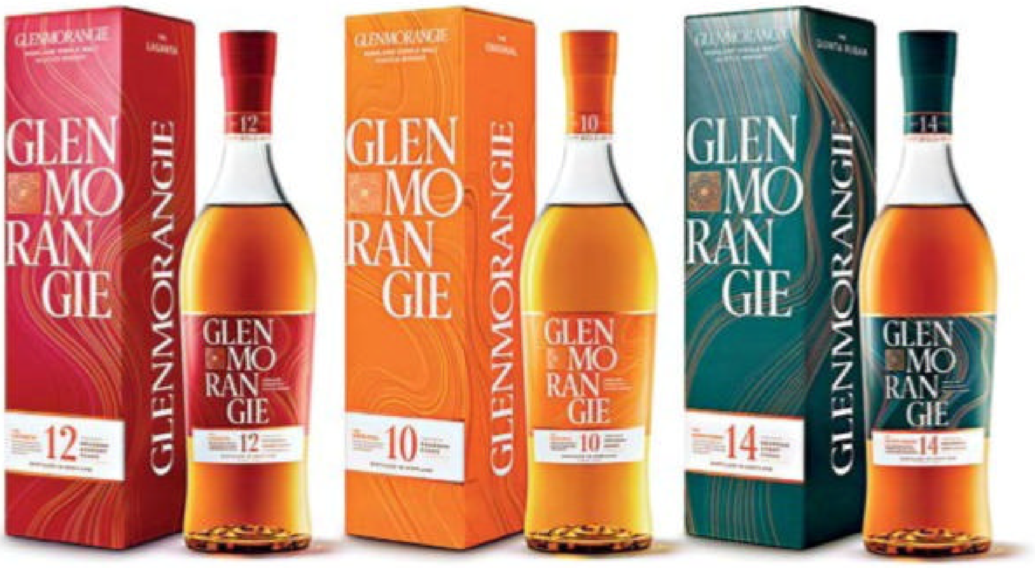
Price ₹2,400 (100ml); **Availability** 82e.com

Highland Fling

Not that the sweet notes of Glenmorangie Highland single malt whisky need pretty packaging to be popular. But in case you're the fussy type, the brand has reimagined its packaging with an elegant new bottle, vivid colours and playful details. It is the core single malts: The Original, The Lasanta and The Quinta Ruban that have been chosen to manifest this spurt of design drama.

Price upwards of ₹5,990 (Mumbai); ₹4,700 (New Delhi); ₹3,500 (Gurgaon); ₹7,788 (Bangalore);

Availability https://www.glenmorangie.com/

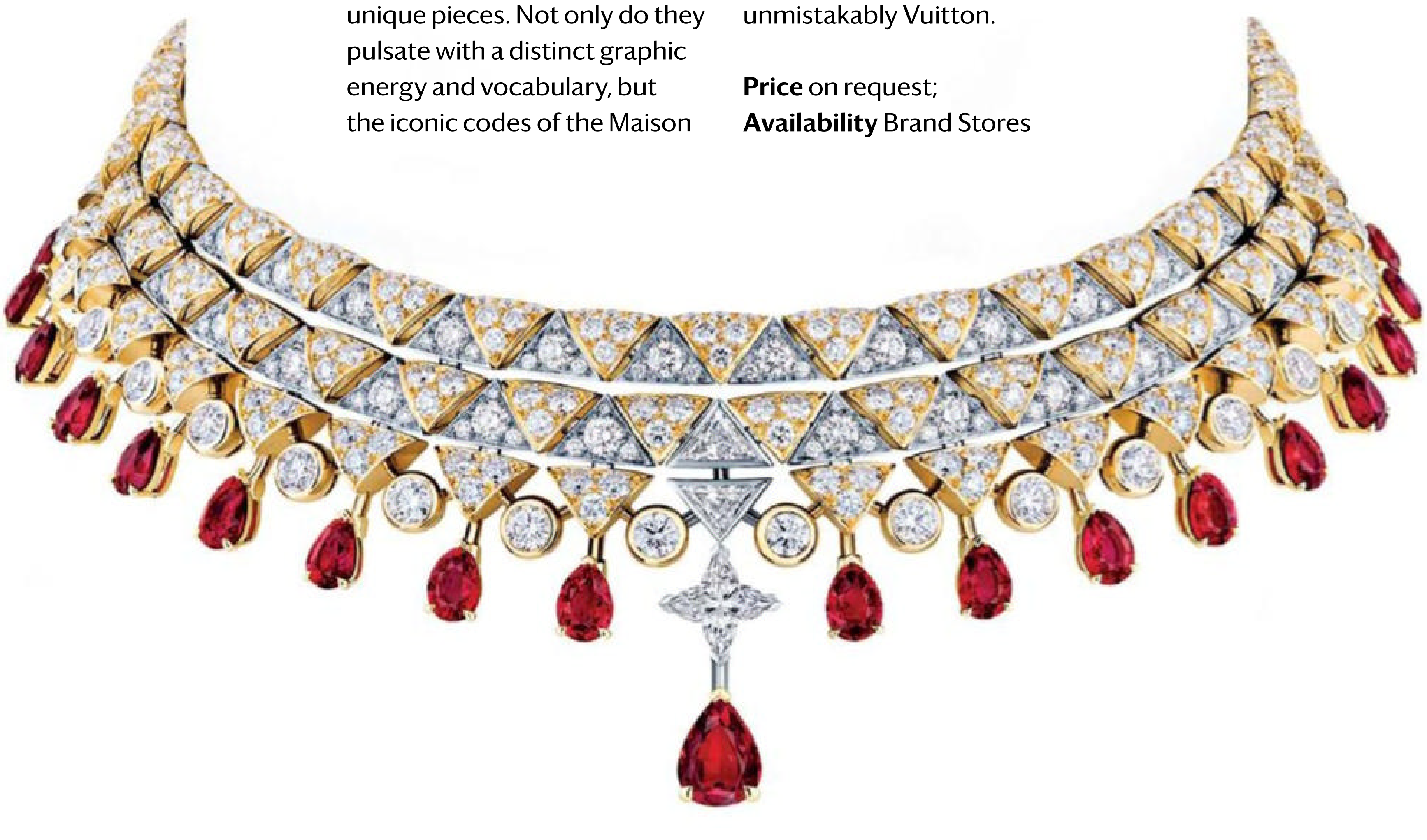


Shinning Bright

Louis Vuitton's tryst with destiny punctuates every statement of their stupendous journey, both as a brand and the company. But for their jewellery collection, the House has added Liberty, Fantasy and Radiance, apart from Destiny to recall the masterful creations from the Maison. While it was originally unveiled in June last year, Vuitton's Spirit high jewellery collection has continued its odyssey into the next and final chapter with 30 unique pieces. Not only do they pulsate with a distinct graphic energy and vocabulary, but the iconic codes of the Maison embody the spirit of the Louis Vuitton woman. Spirit is the fourth high jewellery collection designed by Francesca Amfitheatrof, the Maison's Artistic Director for Watches and Jewellery. The collection represents the sense of freedom that has been a guiding philosophy for the brand, exploring and discovering beyond the realms of comfort and familiarity. The bold confections use uniquely crafted and LV Monogram cut diamonds to construct a vision and design language that is unmistakably Vuitton.

Price on request;
Availability Brand Stores

LOUIS VUITTON



Chariots of Fire

The newest set of haute wheels to hit the Indian market this year

By **YOGENDRA PRATAP**

India shining's sparkle saga seems to have shed some of its tinsel magic on the domestic luxury car market, which has been booming like never before. Although semiconductor shortages and supply-chain disruptions—due to Covid as well as the war in Eastern Europe—have thrown a spanner in the works, preventing sales figures from touching astronomical heights, they are still record breaking. Almost all premium and luxury car manufacturers have order books that run if not in the thousands then in the tens of thousands, and some of the car models are sold out for a few months at the least, but at times for the entire year. Another noteworthy trend is the market moving not only to premium cars but many more of those buyers are now ordering cars that cost upwards of ₹1 crore.

Also, among luxury cars, SUVs continue to be the preferred body style for

the glitterati and the chatterati. They have the longest waiting periods among all of the premium cars because their raging demand is part of a world-wide phenomena. It's no wonder that even a niche company like Lamborghini has not only enjoyed its best year ever globally after launching its first ever SUV—the Urus—but has also continued to do well with the SUV contributing more than half its global sales and a much larger chunk of its burgeoning sales in India. In fact, despite its sales catalogue starting at nearly ₹4 crore, it's order book takes care of all sales for the year and this number is expected to be in three figures for the first time.

While ICE (internal combustion engine) cars make up the bulk of the luxury car market in India, despite high taxes of over 100 per cent on CBUs of the luxury ilk and GST of over 50 per cent on cars assembled here, the sales and manufacturing of BEVs (battery electric vehicles) has not taken off despite the huge tax benefits they receive. This is because to get into the 5 per cent GST slab, the BEVs have to be assembled in India and that is not really happening currently, but as and when it does happen, the will offer better value for money, comparatively speaking. Here's hoping that more EVs are assembled in India in the coming year, because the future is electric.

Mercedes-AMG SL Roadster

Now this is another stunning piece of machinery and fits in well with the range of SLs of the past. Powered by a V8 biturbo petrol engine that produces max power of 585bhp, this SL has the performance to match its looks with a sub-4s 0 to 100kmph acceleration figure and a top speed in excess of 300kmph. Its interiors are modern and though there is comfortable seating only for two, there is space in the rear for two children as well. The interiors are plush and contemporary with a Burmester surround sound system and a touch infotainment screen as well. A party trick as well as great convenience is folding up the roof at the push of a toggle switch. The process is now smoother and quicker and the roof can be deployed in a matter of seconds.
Launch Festive season.

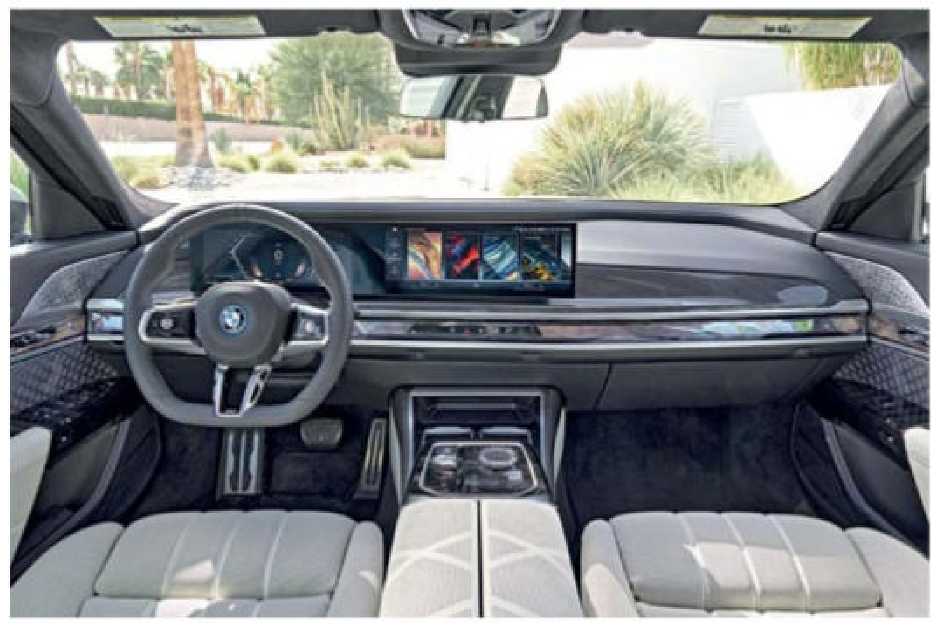
Mercedes-AMG SL Roadster
Model Mercedes-AMG SL 63 4MATIC+
Engine 4.0-litre V8 Bi-Turbo
Power 585bhp
Transmission 9-speed automatic
Torque 800Nm
0-100kmph 3.6 seconds
Price TBA

Ferrari Purosangue
Model Ferrari Purosangue
Engine 6.5-litre naturally-aspirated V12
Transmission 8-speed automatic
Power 725bhp
Torque 716Nm
0-100kmph 3.3 seconds
Price Approx ₹5 crore

Ferrari Purosangue

The Purosangue is Ferrari's answer to the rapidly growing super SUV segment, one in which rivals like Porsche and Lamborghini have been present for a while. Ferrari insists on not labelling it an SUV, instead referring to it as a four-door, four-seat model and name itself signifies a thoroughbred from the stables at Maranello. The design is a reflection of that outlook with more of a jacked-up sportscar look rather than an out-and-out SUV profile similar to rivals such as the Urus, DBX and Cayenne Turbo. With a 6.5-litre naturally-aspirated V12 producing 725bhp and 716Nm, the Purosangue can sprint from 0 to 100kmph in 3.3s. It gets four individual seats and combined with all that performance, it is essentially a four-door supercar on stilts. While Ferrari has already started accepting orders for the crossover, it has not yet been formally launched the car in India.
Launch latter half 2023

RADICAL MEASURES
With the latest 7 Series, BMW has completely re-imagined its flagship luxury sedan



BMW 7-series
Model BMW 740i M Sport
Engine 3.0-litre six-cylinder twin-turbocharged petrol
Transmission 8-speed automatic
Power 381bhp
Torque 520Nm
0-100kmph 5.4 seconds
Price ₹1.70 crore
Launch Jan 2023; deliveries of the 740i expected to start in March

BMW i7
Model BMW i7 xDrive60
Engine Dual-motor, one at each axle
Transmission single speed AT
Power 544bhp
Torque 745Nm
0-100kmph 4.7 seconds
Battery 105 kWh
Range 625 Km
Price ₹1.95 crore

BMW 7 series and BMW i7

Over the last few generations BMW has been making incremental changes in both the design and technology content of its cars, but with the new 7, the company has broken the mould and instead delivered a radical new design. If looks are a big change–the interiors and technology–the features and assistance systems are all keeping pace. Highlights are the interaction bar upfront and a car entertainment system like never before featuring an 8K resolution, 32-inch theatre screen with 5G connectivity and a built in Amazon Fire TV that folds up flat along the roof, small touch screens on both of the rear doors, serving as interfaces for the infotainment system as well as controls for the car. The i7 is essentially a 7 Series with an electric powertrain. Performance is electrifying, given the over 500bhp of power coming from the two motors on each axle and the 745Nm of torque. But for the people who want to enjoy the luxuries of an electric car, BMW has got two-time Oscar and 4-time Grammy winner, the renowned music director Hans Zimmer to compose the soundtracks that go with the many in-built mood settings of the car. The company claims that the car has been certified for a range of up to 625km (WLTP).

Audi Q3 Sportback

After a long absence from the entry-level luxury segment, one which Audi once ruled with the likes of the A3 and Q3, Audi has finally started making attempts to claw back some of the share it has lost to rivals Mercedes-Benz and BMW. Its latest is something that hasn't been offered in India at its price point yet-an entry-level luxury SUV coupe. Derived from the Q3 launched last year, the Q3 Sportback essentially has a sinking roofline giving it more oomph than regular SUVs. Of course, you'll be compromising on rear headroom but hey, you'll be turning way more heads than anything else at an asking price of ₹51.43 lakh (ex-showroom) would. That translates to a premium of around ₹1 lakh over the top-end Q3. Features and specifications-wise, the Q3 Sportback is largely identical to the regular Q3, aside from the inclusion of the S Line styling pack and 18-inch alloy wheels.

Launch Feb 13, 2023

Audi Q3 Sportback

Model Audi Q3 Sportback Technology 40 TFSI
Engine 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbocharged
Transmission 7-speed dual-clutch automatic
Power 190bhp
Torque 320Nm
0-100kmph 7.3 seconds
Price ₹51.43 lakh

Toyota Land Cruiser

Fourteen years after the arrival of the previous generation SUV, Toyota has finally introduced an all-new Land Cruiser, with its India launch happening earlier in the year at the Auto Expo and deliveries just about starting. But don't expect to go to a showroom and get yours immediately even if you can afford the ₹2.17 crore ex-showroom price tag as the demand for the SUV globally has been tremendous, with the company confirming close to a 4-year waiting period for the new Land Cruiser LC300! Compared to the previous generation, the new one builds on the same butch, squared-off look albeit with modern touches like LED lighting front and rear and enough styling changes to differentiate it from its predecessor. Besides seating either five or seven,

Mercedes-Benz EQE

The second dedicated electric vehicle from Mercedes for India could very well be the EQE, as demand for the EQS SUV is high globally and Mercedes Benz just can't make enough of those. As the name implies, this is the electric equivalent of the E-Class and is a great option for an owner-driven car given that its length is under five metres. It features all the tech that one has seen on the EQS electric car including the MBUX Hyperscreen and a twin motor setup with 408bhp on tap and over 800Nm of torque. This gives the EQE performance figures equal to those of a sports car–five seconds for a sprint to 100kmph.

Launch While the car has been on sales abroad for some time we are expecting its India debut towards the fag end of the year.

MBUX Hyperscreen
Model Mercedes Benz EQE 500 4MATIC
Engine Dual-motor, all-wheel drive
Power 408 bhp
Torque 858 Nm
0-100kmph 4.7 seconds
Battery 100 kWh
Range 596 Km
Price ₹90 lakh (estimated)

the interiors have been thoroughly revamped and feature all the trappings of a luxury SUV. For the Indian market, the sole engine option on offer is a 3.3-litre turbo V6 diesel with over 300bhp of max power and 700Nm of torque paired with a 10-speed automatic transmission. But performance is expected to be much better with the SUV having shed nearly 200kg is its new avatar.

Launch Auto Expo, January 2023

Toyota Land Cruiser
Model Toyota Land Cruiser LC300
Engine 3.3-litre V6 turbo
Transmission 10-speed automatic
Power 304bhp
Torque 700Nm
0-100kmph: xx seconds
Price ₹ 2.17 crore

Mercedes-Benz GLC

The mid-sized SUV from Mercedes moves into its second generation with a growth in length and size. It also looks more and more like its older siblings, the GLS and the GLE with totally revamped front and rear. When it does get launched in India around the festive season, we expect it to have two powertrains, petrol and diesel, and also a significantly re-modelled interior. While trims for India are yet to be finalised, we expect it to have all the driver assistances and comfort systems that its siblings offer, to make their way to India as well.

Launch Closer to the festive season

Mercedes-Benz GLC
Model Mercedes-Benz GLC
Engine 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo-diesel
Transmission 9-speed automatic
Power 192 bhp
Torque 400 Nm
0-100kmph 7.9 seconds
Price ₹65-70 lakh (estimated)

GLC 220d
S LC 4009

BMW X1

While BMW has been redesigning its flagship range, the X1 nearly escaped unobserved. While it gets some cosmetic changes on the outside, there is a whole new interior concept along with a re-imagined central console and infotainment system. The car is now larger and seems to have gotten even roomier on the inside and this could be because the ICE and BEV versions of the car now share the same modified platform. Drivetrains at launch include a three-cylinder petrol engine and a four-cylinder-diesel one. Not only does the new X1 look sporty; despite the small engines, it is still quite quick with sub-10 seconds zero to 100kmph figures for both the drivetrains.

Launch Jan 28, 2023; deliveries will take another month or so to begin.

BMW X1
Model: BMW X1 sDrive18d MSport
Engine: 2.0-litre four-cylinder turbo-diesel
Transmission: 7-speed automatic
Power: 150 bhp
Torque: 360Nm
0-100kmph: 8.9 seconds
Price ₹47.9 lakh

Audi
driving experience

STEERING ON ICE

Learning the nuances of driving on ice–a weekend spent gliding across the snow-glazed Tyrolean plains.

Audi RS e-tron GT

440 KW of electric output

830 NM of torque

0-100 KMPH acceleration in 3.3 seconds

MAXIMUM RANGE up to 481 kms

Audi RS 5 Sportback

331 KW of output

600 NM of torque

0-100 KMPH acceleration in 3.9 seconds

By **RIAAN JACOB GEORGE**

If you are a seasoned petrolhead, chances are, you've been able to drift a powerful sports car across a tarmac, or at a racing circuit somewhere. However, drifting an ultra-powerful car on sheets of ice is an altogether different experience. And when it's in a setting as surreal as the Austrian town of Seefeld, in the Tyrol region, with some of the best driving instructors on the planet–now that's experiential luxury in its purest form. While most people visit Seefeld to ski, I'm here to drive on ice; enrolled in the highly-coveted Audi ice-driving experience. As the name suggests, this is a guided drive, hosted by the German luxury car maker, where auto enthusiasts can test out the *quattro* performance of two Audi cars in conditions that are, well, not your everyday drive.

Not-so-gentle giants

We have two fantastic cars to train with: The RS e-tron GT and the RS 5 Sportback. The former is Audi's first all-electric sports car, busting all the myths of EVs with its beastly performance. The latter is a four-seater, performance-driven coupé with the plush interiors of a luxury sports car. And the experiences laid out before us include high-speed braking/lane change, oversteering, understeering, dynamic drifting and a timed circuit. Each driver must complete every experience in both cars. This is ideal for me because one can feel the thrill and rumble of the traditional internal combustion engine(ICE) (RS 5 Sportback) and the novel experience and silent power of a super-EV (RS e-tron GT). While the perennial debate between ICE and EV persists, The latter weighs in on account of overall handling and luxury.

driving experience

About the physics

No matter how seasoned a driver, controlling a car on ice is a whole new ball game. The flat ice plains, where we are driving today, are so slippery that it's often tough even to walk without the occasional slip. Moreover, the instructors ask us to switch off the traction control system–a daunting task–so as to hone our control skills. Thankfully, I can rely on Audi's legendary *quattro* all-wheel drive, which will be put to its ultimate test over the next two days.

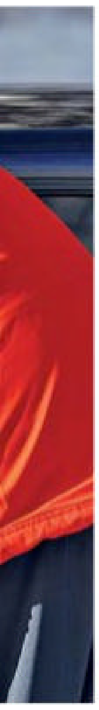
Following a thorough briefing, we begin with a warm-up of sorts on a demarcated slalom course, on both cars, to understand the tyre-on-ice dynamic at very slow speeds. My first exercise for the day is a high-speed braking and lane change to avoid a mock obstacle. The idea is to change lanes and slow down to effectively avoid collision. It also takes a lesson in physics to understand the dynamics, momentum and inertia, and keeping it all in mind. My biggest lesson today: in slippery conditions, just a little flick of the wheel can send the car on an unexpected roll. So my instructor tells me, while changing lanes and braking, to gently turn the wheel so the car moves to safety and slows down.

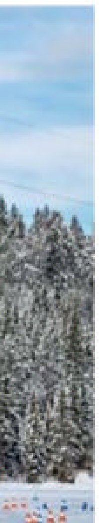
The subsequent exercises help me understand

EXPERIENTIAL LUXURY FOR VIP CUSTOMERS

- Luxury carmakers constantly provide ancillary experiences–both ticketed and on-invite basis–to top-tier customers. Ferrari Mumbai sent some of its VIP customers to Abu Dhabi's Yas Marina Circuit for Ferrari Race Days to drive the latest 296 GTB model, along with members of the Ferrari Challenge and Club Challenge to break speed records.
- At the Porsche Ice Experience, which takes place in northern Finland, customers can test models like Porsche 911 GT3 or the Porsche 911 Turbo S, with skilled instructors and dynamic drifts.
- The Defender Journeys, organised by Jaguar Land Rover India, invites customers on a curated road trip across some picturesque regions in India, testing the capabilities of the iconic Defender.
- Mercedes-Benz now invites its top tier customers to a few 'money can't buy' experiences ranging from an F1 Paddock Club experience or a chance to meet a sports star such as Lewis Hamilton or MS Dhoni.

driving experience





SPEED RACER
Lane changing and high speed braking exercises (Top); Snapshots from different training modules (Left and Far left), with professional instructors on the ice drive (Above left).

oversteering (when the car turns more than the amount steered) and understeering (when the car turns less than the amount of steer I give to the vehicle). "Unwind the steering, leg off the accelerator and let the car come back into control,"

explains the instructor, during a massive understeer, as I manage hand, leg and eye coordination at a frenetic pace. I particularly enjoy the exercise that entails entering a corner at a slow pace, locking the wheel, letting the rear end of the car jut out cheekily, only to regain control of it within a few seconds. This is met by a cheerful "***bravissimo***" by the vigilant and exacting instructor.

Austria drift

In all these years of driving luxury cars, this is effectively my first time drifting on ice and the dynamics of this require a couple of hours on the ice fields to master. Yes, they do teach you some basic drifts here, and keeping one's leg on the gas, as the car drifts and letting the engineering kick in is an absolute thrill. After a couple of drives, I find myself capable of doing a half decent drift, with large plumes of snow in my wake. To culminate all these training modules, the instructors put us through a timed lap combining all the skills that we've learnt so far, which has me 'waltz' my RS 5 Sportback between cones, to the tune of one of Strauss' famous Austrian waltzes. Honestly, the drift on the snow does feel like a bit of a dance.

Caravan Tripping in RAJASTHAN

Hit the road to explore the great outdoors, ensconced in the comfort of your own luxury mini house on wheels.

By **PALLAVI PASRICHA**

Watching Netflix on the go, tucking in cosily under a goose down duvet, with an electric blanket for that extra warmth, reaching for a chilled can of Coca Cola from the mini fridge and lounging around playing board games while driving past charming landscape. This may conjure up visions of a caravan trip through New Zealand or Europe, but this journey was happening closer home–from dusty Delhi to sandy Jodhpur.

At the crack of dawn on a chilly winter morning, I stepped into an RV (recreational vehicle) and over the next eight hours, as the colours changed from the glowing mustard fields of Haryana to the undulating sand dunes of Rajasthan, the hours slipped by easily and comfortably in my exclusive

freewheeling chariot.

That is not a surprise in itself. After all, modern day caravans pack in many conveniences and this one is no different. In its swanky beige and wooden interiors, two large sofas easily seat four people, a smart TV and a miniature kitchen cabinet is stacked with impressive cutlery, glassware, and stemware. On one side is a queen size bed with a sliding door that converts comfortably into a mini-bedroom with yet another smart TV and it comes with mood lighting to match the changing light outside. The compact, airline-style bathroom is spic and span with a hand shower and a small geyser, which obviates the most basic necessity of finding clean restrooms on a road trip.

*

ROLLING RESIDENCE
Modern day caravans come with many conveniences (Opposite page); Two large sofas and a smart TV in the caravan make road trips comfortable and enjoyable

Two hours into the journey, as hunger pangs strike, chicken sandwiches and juices from the well-stocked mini fridge serve well. But don't feel the pressure of whipping up any Martha Stewart home tips as there is a helper on board, who will happily brew a cup of coffee or tea and, most importantly, clean up afterwards.

The passing flash of blooming fields straddling the highway help to unplug from the city. But while killing time on the road and cramped limbs can become a bit challenging on a long journey, this is where the mini-home on wheels unfolds its magic. I convert the sofa into a full flatbed and retire for a rom-com sink with outstretched legs. The two TVs are preloaded with an Amazon firestick with all the popular OTT channels. Further, there are ample charging points in the RV and Wi-Fi as well.

Milestones

As lunchtime approaches, choices open up between the comfort of having a meal in the caravan, which has an electric kettle and an induction plate, or stepping out for piping hot food at a highway dhaba to soak up the outdoors. The latter is more appealing so we stop at Mandawa and tuck into Rajasthani delicacies for good measure and local flavours.

The first halt at dusk is at a campsite in Bikaner that sets the tone for the outdoor experience that is an intrinsic part of a caravan holiday. "RV On", the company with which I am travelling, has tie-ups with accredited hotels so that parking and safety is not a concern. Tea around the bonfire is followed by a meal of lal maas, kersangri and dal. This caravan also comes with camping gear and cycles, in case you want to wander far.

After breakfast, we hit the road for the final leg of our journey to Jodhpur. The road is smooth and apart from catching up on some work and watching Netflix, I also manage to catch a snooze for a while on the comfortable bed.

The caravan rolls in around 2pm at our next destination – MharoKhet, a sprawling farm on the outskirts of Jodhpur where one can stroll around guava orchards and have meals rustled up with freshly plucked produce. Growing exotic vegetables and herbs from jalapenos to broccoli and oyster mushrooms, it offers a farm to table experience with a choice of regional Indian and international cuisine. But the Indian also comes with a twist. For instance, the famous Rajasthani dish of dal, bati, churma is replaced by bati stuffed with ricotta cheese, baked bell peppers are served with pudina chutney and a fire-burnt slice of jalapeno.

After spending the night in Jodhpur and exploring the city the next day, it's time to journey back to Delhi. This time, however, we do it at night. Snuggling into the duvet, adjusting the mood lighting above the bed and drawing down the window blinds as the RV makes its way along the highway, is a wrap for the holiday and the rip. It's a novel experience because it's rare for road trippers to travel at night. The journey must have been without jerks because I wake up only when I am close to Delhi, spoilt for life for road trips.

PIT STOPS
MharoKhet near Jodhpur offers a farm to table experience (Above left); Camping equipment and cycles come with the caravan (Bottom far left); The airline-style bathroom comes with a small geyser (Above)

FACTFILE

Caravan companies in India

RV On
https://rvon.in/
Contact +91-9958065600
Cost For a couple or a family of 3-4 the price ranges from ₹1.25 lakh to 1.50 lakh (the itinerary for different destinations can be customised so call for details)

Carawander
www.carawander.com
Contact +91 6006795522
Cost The caravan needs to be hired for minimum of two days and it starts from ₹18,000 per day (pan-India)

Caravaa Travelers
https://www.carvaaindia.com/
Contact +91 8448261230
Cost: Five-person caravan costs ₹7500 per day and a seven-person caravan for ₹9500 per day (does not include fuel cost).

LuxeCamper
https://luxecamper.com/
Contact +91 7666577777
Cost: Starts from ₹15,000 per day for 4 people

Green Dot Expeditions
Contact +91 6280595008
https://greendotexpeditions.com/
Cost: Starts from ₹1500 and goes up to ₹15,000 per person per night depending on the package and facilities chosen.

The Sunshine Car

The 2023 Mercedes E53 Cabriolet is everything you would want in a sports car and then some more.

By **DHIRAM SHAH**

I'll just come out and say it: I absolutely love convertibles. Sure, for us Mumbaikars, conditions are far from favourable to ride an open-top automobile. Our summers are too humid; it rains a lot, and, of course, the air quality in the city has deteriorated to an extent that Delhi air seems cleaner. But with the 2023 Mercedes E53 Cabriolet in my driveway, I decided to set aside skepticism and take my parents on a long drive.

The E53 Cabriolet is a sibling of one of Mercedes' highest-selling models in the country, the E-Class sedan. While it bears a strong resemblance, it is equally distinct. It is for the very first time that an E53 has got the Mercedes-AMG's iconic Panamericana grille. Flanked by brand-new headlights and bold vertical slats, the grille immediately draws attention. Changes are a bit limited on the rear end to new taillamps and quad exhaust pipes, but nonetheless, this AMG is a feast for the eyes from every possible angle.

The E53 Cabriolet's cabin is a wonderful and comfortable place to be. I admit, I was initially wary of subjecting my elderly parents to a 120 km-long drive through the lovely, winding, Lonavala hills in a sports convertible, but the car proved me wrong. Although getting in the rear seat with the roof down was a challenge, but in no time, they made themselves comfortable on the sports seats, and soon, infectious smiles were par for the course. Behind the wheel, I was greeted by two stunning 12.3-inch screens—one for the digital instrument cluster and the other for the MBUX infotainment system. After a point in time, my mother, who was seated next to me, was easily managing the touchscreen console. This, for me, speaks volumes of the intuitiveness and easy-to-use interface of the MBUX system.

UNDER THE HOOD

At the heart of the E53 Cabriolet is a 3.0-litre turbocharged inline-six engine that delivers 435bhp. It works with a small electric motor dubbed EQ boost that adds an additional 21 bhp. Mated with a 9-speed automatic gearbox made the car extremely easy to drive, and navigating through traffic-clogged Mumbai roads was an absolute breeze. But, it was on the expressway when the E53 truly proved its mettle. The all-wheel-drive system provided an unrelenting grip while the engine galloped

Specifications

ENGINE 3.0 litre V6 turbocharged petrol
TRANSMISSION 9-speed automatic, 4WD
POWER 435 [+22] bhp / 520 [+250] Nm
0 TO 100 KM/HR 4.5 sec
PRICE ₹ 1.30 Cr

every time I pressed the accelerator pedal. Though not as loud as a V8 engine, this V6 still banged and crackled in downshifts, making me laugh and grin like a child.

On the Ghats, we decided to have a change in perspective by toggling the roof switch. A series of electric motors went into action to start a carefully conducted mechanical orchestra that neatly folded our roof and tucked it into the trunk. While cruising at triple-digit speeds and admiring the lush green mountains, we were still able to talk among ourselves thanks to the innovative Aircap technology that deflects the wind and keeps the cabin quieter, despite being open to the elements.

In the rarefied world of sports cars, there are those that prioritise raw performance above all else, while others focus on a more engaging driving experience with refined driver feedback and a focus on lightweight simplicity. Some prioritise appearance yet sacrifice performance in the process. The Mercedes-AMG E53 Cabriolet offers the right amount of everything. It can zip to 100 km/hr in just 4.5 seconds, lets you comfortably cruise in the city, and keeps you entertained when driving on empty roads, negotiating hair pin bends along the way. Unlike other sportscars, this is the one you can drive to work, go shopping in and take your family on a long drive; maybe just to soak in the sun. Or for its swag. Either way, once it's in your stable, the bragging rights are yours to flaunt. It's time to char the tar!

TECH PERFECT
A flick on the driving mode selector gives you a totally different driving experience (Below)

ATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING Hoots' hosts a Speakeasy vibe; Albert's Old Fashioned (Below)

RAISE THE BAR

SPICE TOASTS THE NEWEST BARS THAT CELEBRATE IMAGINATION, PANACHE, AND INNOVATIVE HOSPITALITY TO GIVE INDIA'S COCKTAIL CIRCUIT MORE POWER FOR THE COURSE.

By **GAGAN SHARMA**

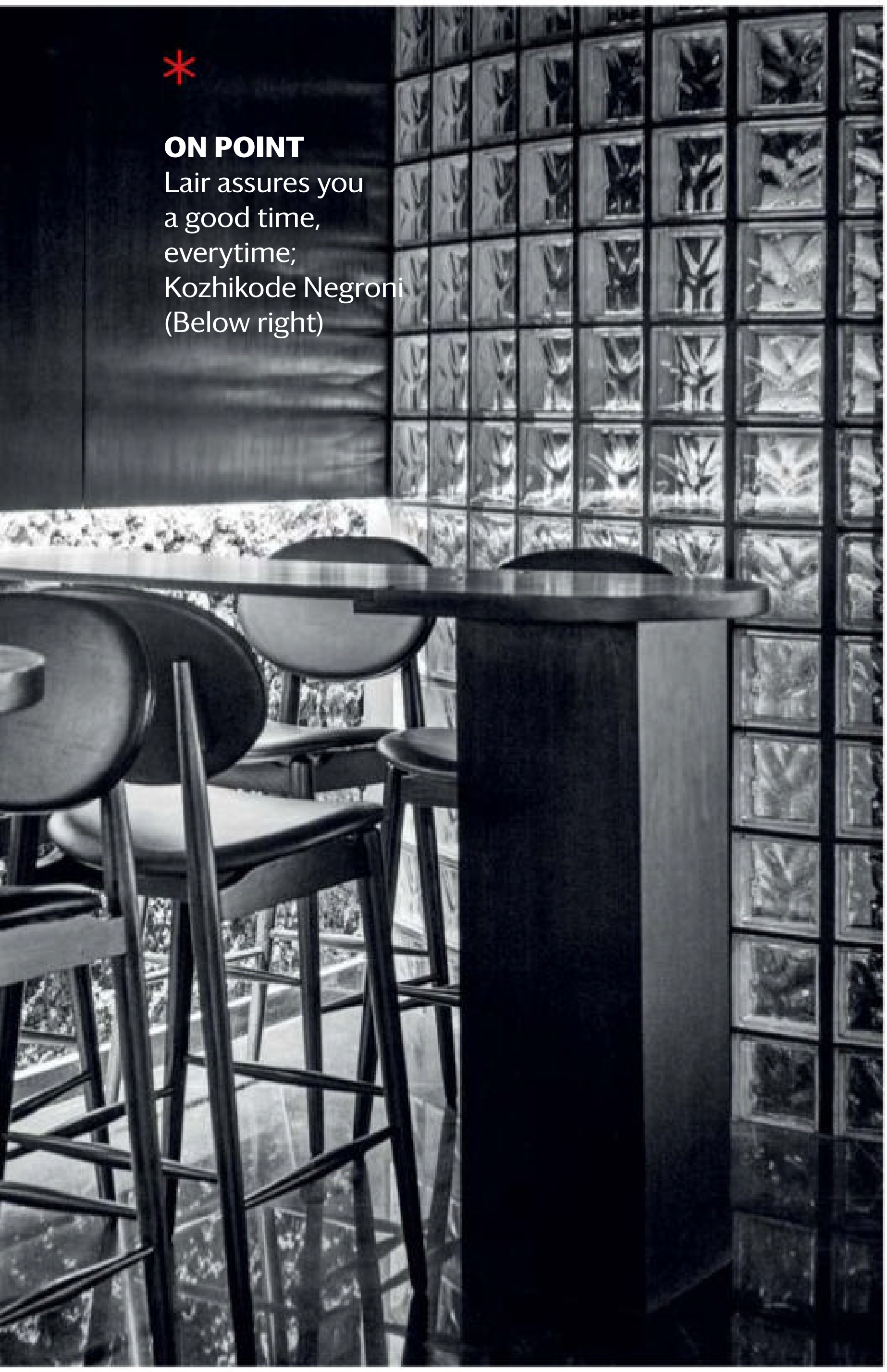
Distilling the perfect cocktail is an artful production: The idea, inception, curation, preparation, portions, presentation, nomenclature, the storytelling, and finally the actual taste test. India has finally risen to the occasion grabbing eight of the 100 top seats at the last Asia's 50 Best Bars. This wave has brought to shore themed bars, with classy menus, interesting storytelling, with thought-provoking drinks, bites, and ambience to score both on the surprise and delight quotient. Here are some pit stops that mark the golden hour for Indian mixology.

HOOTS', Delhi

Imagine an intimate 16-20 seating space, candle-lit, with leather bound couches, and whiffs of the fragrant cigar leaf wafting through with Frank Sinatra gently cooing on a vinyl record. No barstools, no food menu. Push past an unpretentious, unlabelled white door that opens out to a spiffily- dressed bartender in a waist-coat on the other side, who greets you with a minimalist menu that capture a twist of classics and signatures. Hoots' is a worthy embodiment of a prohibition-era speakeasy bar. What Hoots' does well, and really well at that, are classics-inspired drinks that are technically sound and refreshing at the same time. The two-page menu features page one with twists on Old Fashioned, Negroni, Martini, Highballs, and Sours, and the other page showcases 10 signature drinks that are not named, but numbered. Setting a benchmark for poised hospitality with a thoughtfully-curated theme, Hoots' is as much a find for hospitality professionals as it is for consumers who wish to enjoy a drink in quiet civility.

POISON OF CHOICE No. 5 (with olive), No 7, Albert's Old Fashioned

LAIR, Delhi



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ON POINT
Lair assures you a good time, everytime; Kozhikode Negroni (Below right)

Garnish cocktails are gaining popularity in India now, and of these, Lair remains the new-gen kingmaker. When Jai Solanki, the acclaimed chef behind Asian Haus, Amma Haus, and others, forayed into setting up a bar, the unexpected was the least we could expect. Lair doesn't disappoint; it is an upbeat drinking destination, with brow-raising goodness at the bar, and on the plate. The food is impeccable, but it's the drinks here that grab eye balls and refill highballs. A four-part menu takes you on a journey with ingredients from across the country, distinguished by their complexity, sophistication, and technical prowess. They've single-handedly made Palomas and Picantes sexy again, and brought garnishes like nostalgia-stricken magic pops, niche and invigorating mocha canapés, lemon tarts, tea infused with dry ice, kaffir salt, and sumac powder, that your Instagram feed craves for. What Lair embodies is consistency, innovation, and smooth hospitality with truffle popcorn masquerading as their unofficial mascot.

POISON OF CHOICE 16th Century, Chintapalli Gimlet, Paloma, Picante, Sumerians

HOME, PVR DIRECTOR'S CUT, Delhi

This is easily one of the most attractive bars in the capital: Home is experimental, experiential, and intellectual. It boasts a cocktail philosophy that others can barely imitate or emulate. During ideation, the two ideas that gained stead were to create drinks that were timeless, and to champion minimalism. The result, a menu that takes nuanced inspiration from fermentation and the energies and power of the solar system. Home's cocktails celebrate elements like Earth, balance, gravity, light, and the sun to name a few. The ambience offers a feeling of grandeur and the food & drink are right on cue. It's one of the few bars that's seldom loud, or busy, and solicits having conversations with the team. They've pushed definitions and boundaries of mixology, presenting techniques that are gaining global acclaim. For instance, one of their drinks looks and tastes like wine, comes in a wine glass, but is blasphemously served with a giant clear ice, and no garnish whatsoever. The new menu that's yet to unfold will be purely vegetable based, something that's utterly ambitious, but if done right, absolutely praiseworthy, I'm sure.

*

PITCHER PERFECT
Flora and Aqua: Vodka, beetroot liqueur, bitter Balsamic, floral blossom (Above); Equilibrio gin, mandarin and clear tomato, gondhoraj, rectified tonic (Above right)

POISON OF CHOICE Oremo, Equilibrio, Marsado

NATIVE COCKTAIL ROOM, Jaipur

The UNESCO Heritage-tagged Pink City has always echoed nostalgic destinations: Amber Fort, City Palace, Patrika Gate, Jantar Mantra, and the old walled city. Add to that a new destination–the Native Cocktail Room. It is located inside an old Kothi that doubles up as an unpretentious, unassuming heritage hotel on a silent residential by-lane of one of Jaipur's civil colonies. A flight of stairs takes you up to the bar, which is a tiny world unto itself in this oyster of an old structure. This is a bar that is smaller than a hotel room's pantry but dishes out consistent drinks at a pace that you can't keep up with. The decor is reminiscent of Jaipur but the vibe says Rome, Melbourne, or even Delhi. The food here supersedes the drinks and the drinks supersede the fares. But what reigns is the hospitality of the husband-wife duo, who are still the face of the bar and as zealous as any hospitality legend you can think of. The drinks are named after cities of the country, embodying them in a glass, with just startling in appearance as in taste.

COPITAS, FOUR SEASONS HOTEL, Bengaluru

* **GREENER FUTURE**
Coorg: coffee whisky, Stout and bitters, lavender milk, peanut vermouth (Right); Fruit: gin, black lemon cordial (Above)

If the precursor for complexity is simplicity, Copitas adopts it grandly. Much like a couplet by Ghalib or Juan Eliya that provokes the most profound emotion with a rare economy of words, the cocktails here opt for easy felicity. Built on the twin cheers of sustainability and nostalgia, their Greener Future menu is worth a capture in both memory and insta reels. Utilising all parts of a plant, the drinks are called Fruit, Flower, Leaf, Root, Stem, and Seeds, with flavour influences that are nostalgic and pick ingredients that make you smile. Something as simple as a peanut candy bar or a make-it-yourself paan, their drinks are theatrical without imposing forced grandiosity. What really impresses is their seriousness towards sustainability; even outside of the drinks they use discarded KOTs and slips for coasters, recycle old bills into seed bombs, and much more. The location itself should keep Copitas on your to-do list.

POISON OF CHOICE
Seed, Root, Fruit

POISON OF CHOICE
Coorg, Valley Flowers, Zafran Sour, Jodhpur

SPECIAL MENTION
Jaipur's Native Cocktail Room (Left); Yellow Jodhpur with smokey tequila, cumin and Mathania chilli syrup, ananaas, citrus (Far left)

LIBRARY BAR, THE LEELA PALACE, Delhi

With institutions like Megu, Le Cirque, and Jamavar, the bar at The Leela Palace New Delhi had to be equally meritorious. For the longest time, their legacy was built upon the 'library' of spirits they carried, including the uber-rare Cognac Louise XIII Black Pearl (₹1.5 lakh for 30ml). That ostentation apart, it was as much a victim of the lack of innovation as any hotel bar. However, with the cocktail revolution sweeping the country, the Library Bar stepped up. Finally, it now boasts a cocktail programme that deserves a special detour. Drawing inspiration from its name, their drinks are titled honouring books, songs, novels, movies, artists and sculptures. The bibliophile in you will be intrigued to hear all the stories that punctuate the menu. My favourite is the Song of Solomon, picked up from the Bible, taking inspiration from the holy wine that was prepared with herbs and sweetened with lavender. The clarified cocktail looks soothing and tastes uplifting. What Library Bar has done is daring–extending an invitation to the straight-drinks-swearing gentry of Luteyen's Delhi into exploring the familiar, and they have done it with utter sophistication.

POISON OF CHOICE
Song Of Solomon, Gravity's Rainbow

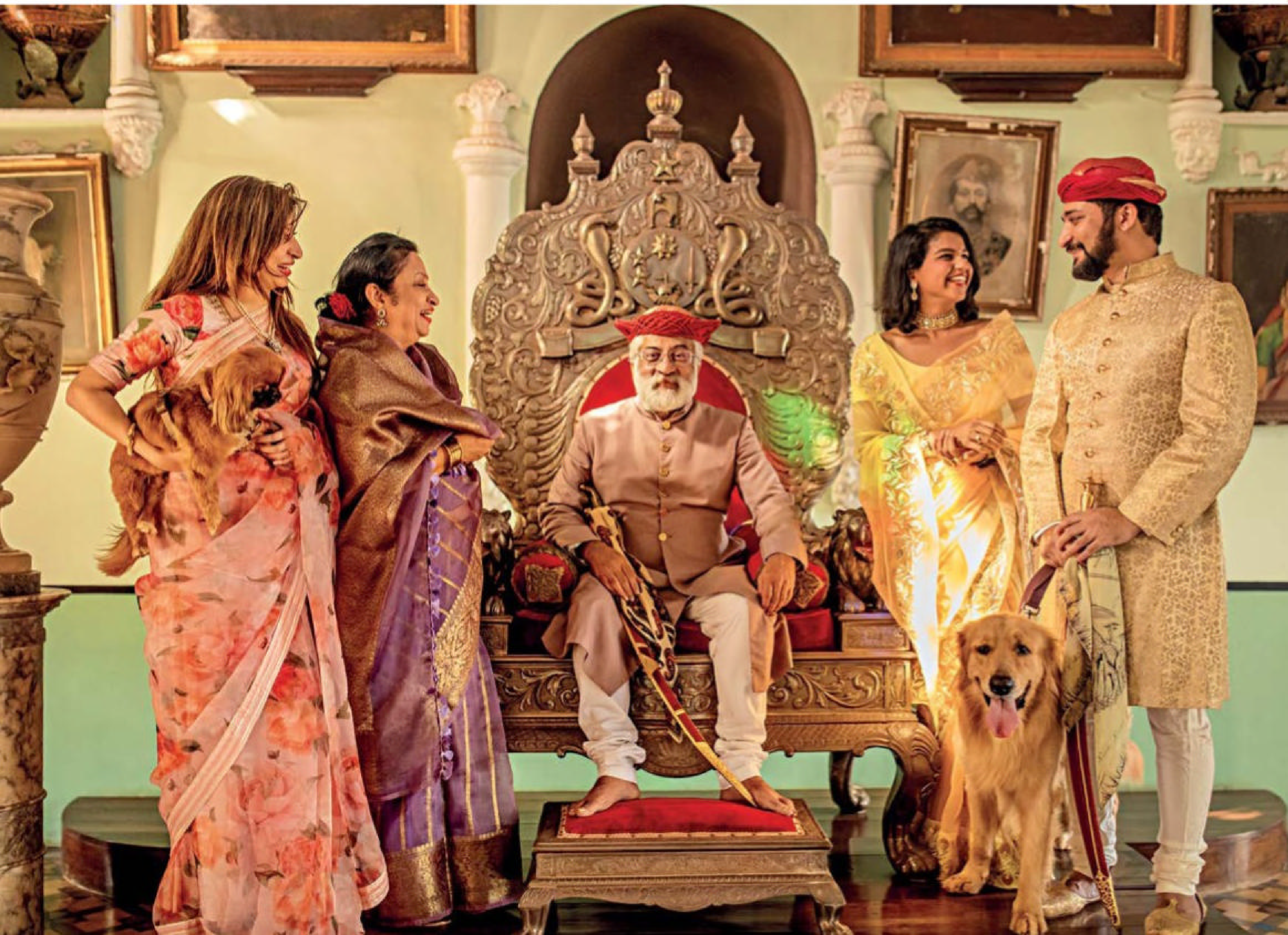
BIG BANG
This cocktail has vodka, passion fruit, lime, hibiscus tonic, and cardamom essence (Above)

*

ROYAL HOUSEHOLD The Bhonsle family in attendance; Parshuram Room (Right); Sitting area of the Narsimha Room (Bottom right)

History plays Mannequin

The Sawantwadi Palace Boutique Art Hotel offers a glimpse into the rich artistic and culinary heritage of the family that has ruled the princely state for four centuries.



By **ADITI PAI**

Today finds an easy reference within the glory days of past tradition at the historic Sawantwadi Palace Boutique Art Hotel. Here, fiercely guarded palace recipes such as sunti gola and keshari maas share space with ramen and croissants in the royal kitchen. Just as heritage art forms such as the Persian-origin ganjifa paintings and lacquer ware find modern expression on night lamps and mirror frames. At the two-month-old Sawantwadi Palace Boutique Art Hotel, currently the only royal residence-hotel in Maharashtra, heritage marries modernity in every experience, making the union appear almost seamless.

The 'rajwada' is the residence of the Sawant-Bhonsles, the former rulers of the region. The princely state was founded in 1627 and Khem Sawant III built the palace in 1755 using the local red laterite stone home and gave it distinctly European arches. But it was Lakham Khem Bhonsle and his wife Shraddha Lakham Bhonsle, the youngest generation of the royal family, who revamped and re-imagined a section of their stately home as an art hotel. Their training at the Culinary Institute of America reflects in the eclectic menus that they draw up for their guests.

The Taisaheb Wada, residence of the former queens, was converted into a boutique hotel that is a nod to the artistic heritage of the family. "It is a culmination of heritage, art, history and all that our family has supported over decades," says Shraddha, who spends long hours experimenting with recipes and fanning her love for Japanese and Korean cuisines.

The Art of Craft

Art enjoyed great patronage in this princely state and the family's love for art forms is reflected in every corner here. Lakham's grandparents Shivram-raje Bhonsle, the ruler of Sawantwadi until India's independence, and his wife Satvashiladevi Bhonsle had set up Sawantwadi Lacquerwares to promote ganjifa and lacquer to support the

dwindling community of artists. Their patronage has kept the art forms alive in the region and allowed the artists to flourish. Ganjifa, which finds its roots in Persia, took a new form in this region with mythological figures and tales, particularly depicting the various avatars of Lord Vishnu, which gained prominence and support.

The newly created art hotel gives these traditional crafts a modern form. Heirloom furniture pieces were brought out of storage rooms, dusted, re-upholstered and lacquered. Ganjifa artists, who work within the Bhonsle residence, were asked to give their art a contemporary form and paint on mirror frames, night lamps and study tables. "We want people to sit on this furniture and start discussing the art form. We've tried to incorporate art into everything and want to show people how these traditional arts can add a pop of colour to any space," says Shraddha.

The hotel has six suites; designed on the theme of each of the incarnations of Vishnu. The Mastya suite, for instance, which pays tribute to the fish avatar, has a fish-shaped door knob and a large painting aesthetically placed on a wall. The furniture is part of the family's collection—either crafted by the former raja, Shivaramraje Bhonsle or collected over the years. The hotel also houses two Iranian furniture sets that have been lacquered by their in-house artists. Comfortable sink-in beds, embroidered cushions and fragranced toiletries add that modern touch of luxury. The hotel uses minimal plastic; the rooms have sanitised glass water bottles and dispensers for soap. "We want to make it as eco-friendly as possible," says Shraddha.

FOOD ART
Clockwise from left: The Boutique Art Hotel; the Angan or courtyard; Breakfast setting by the poolside with mimosas; Rajwada Thali; Breakfast includes croissant, chipotle eggs benedict, shakshuka; Kurma room

The Royal Plate

The culinary background of the young couple reflects in the emphasis they place on the menu every day. In a place where the Malvani masala in fish, meat and vegetable curries is the staple diet, the Art Hotel serves flaky croissants and prettily plated desserts for breakfast, local meals for lunch, royal recipes as bar snacks and Asian tasting menus for dinner. Lakham and Shraddha often customise meals to suit their guests. "We encourage guests to focus on the food as part of their memorable experience here," says Shraddha whose stints at Oceana and the Bombay Bread Bar in New York and a Korean restaurant in Charleston, steered her towards Asian flavours. She makes regular trips to Goa, a 45 minute drive away, to buy ramen, sauces and other ingredients. Lakham, a baker and pastry chef brings his three years of valued experience in the kitchens of Ritz Carlton to create desserts and tea cakes that until now were unheard of in this region.

With coconut groves framing the red building of the hotel, an imaginative gastronomic experience and the friendly hospitality of the royal couple, this boutique hotel offers travellers a quiet alternative to the bustling holiday hotspot of Goa, which is less than an hour away. Imagine besting the Goan experience, but with a royal touch.

Where Sindhudurg, Khaskilwada, Amboli Rd, Sabniswada, Sawantwadi, Maharashtra 416510; sawantwadipalace.com; 02363 - 272010

Cost Upwards of ₹12,,000 per night

HILTON AMINGIRI RESORT & SPA, MALDIVES

EMERALD OOZE

A matchless blend of the classy Hilton pedigree and haute gastronomy puts the brand-new Amingiri on top of the Maldives lust list.

By **RUPALI DEAN**

Twenty minutes of gentle bobbing on the emerald waves of the Indian Ocean brings you to the tranquil lagoon-setting of the Hilton Amingiri Resort & Spa, Maldives. The nirvana credentials of this luxury island-hotel are well endorsed by yacht transfers, private pools and personal butlers. The pampering begins as soon as you land at Malé, only to be greeted by the resort's own convoy of indulgent yachts.

Malé may be close, but it's far enough to amplify the 'lost in the ocean' tranquillity. Thatched roofs set against clumps of fragrant frangipani groves, quintessential palms and hibiscus clusters ensure that beauty and colour are adequate decor accents for the villas' wooden doorways that dot the sandy lanes. The GEM–Amingiri's new word for butler–plays up to expectations and the moniker beautifully, and is a bonus check that literally organises the flow and fluidity of everyday at this wonderous island retreat. Indeed, that is the mark of a true holiday when your needs are anticipated and furnished before you have had time to outline them. Facilities are exceptional: From the dive team that offers and organises sub-aquatic excursions (whether you're looking to encounter black-tip sharks, manta rays, and hawksbill turtles); hiring a jet ski or taking a dolphin-spotting cruise; to the impressive kid's club. Re Fuel, a rooftop lounge, is unique to the Maldives and is an exclusive party post for teenage guests who are served zero-proof beverages. For landlubbers, there are cooking classes to fancy up your rendition of the typical local fare of fish curry and Roshi (local bread). Whether it's sunrise yoga, a Corallium tour or a massage at the Spa, there is a constant at play here: The best is at hand.

THE LURE

Honest smiles accompany peerless service, while managers are remarkably hands-on. The Spa, a first to familiarise the traditional Hammam experience–longstanding Turkish bathing ritual–with a 21st century receptivity is a fairytale. Each food and beverage experience is top drawer. From the buzzy Beach Shack where buckets of azure water prawns are washed down with champagne, to the epicurean highs of Origin that revels in sustainable seafood, obtained through ageing techniques and a mindful food upcycling approach is

a first for Maldives. At Aura, don't miss the Poke Bowl, but do make a pit stop for a session at the cocktail lab that is devoted exclusively to mixology. Enjoying their colourful confections in fiery colours is a great way to bid adieu to the island sun.

Breakfast at their all-day dining restaurant, Habitat, has to be seen to be believed–an impressive buffet is par for the course in all luxury resorts, but this is an indulgent wishlist of extraordinary wiles with everything you could possibly want, hope for and desire. From every imaginable kind of milk to

AQUATIC THERAPY
The two-bedroom over water pool villa at the resort

BLISS OUT
Top to bottom:
The luxurious
Amingiri Spa;
Sip Tea Lounge

Maldivian fare and exotic fruits like you never imagined. The seaside Sip Tea Lounge is a carnival of tea cultures through the world; trot around the world in your tea cup as you explore fifty-one flavours to discover new favourites and frontiers. For those biased toward a glass of golden bubbles instead, champagne evenings, cigar pairing, gin flights, and blind wine tastings are yours for the asking at the adults-only over water bar Eden. Ensconced within the bar is the Discovery Room that abounds in displaying aroma boards and a tasting table, and is the perfect place to learn about the history of various distilleries or discuss the dissimilarities between a prosecco and the unrivalled Sa Ken. Did I mention that each of the 109 villas comes with a private pool? After all, there is always a time and place to sink your trivial pursuits.

Where Hilton Maldives Amingiri Resort & Spa, North Malé Atoll, 08540, Maldives
Cost Over water villas and beach villas start from approximately INR 1,25,000 ++, depending on the season (shared transfers, breakfast and dinner included).
Contact Phone +960 6646364; mleai_hotel@hilton.com; hilton.com

Passion on a Plate

LUPA's 11,000 sq. ft space is a glorious mélange of rustic outdoors and glamourous, maximalist decor.

By **ANUBHUTI KRISHNA**

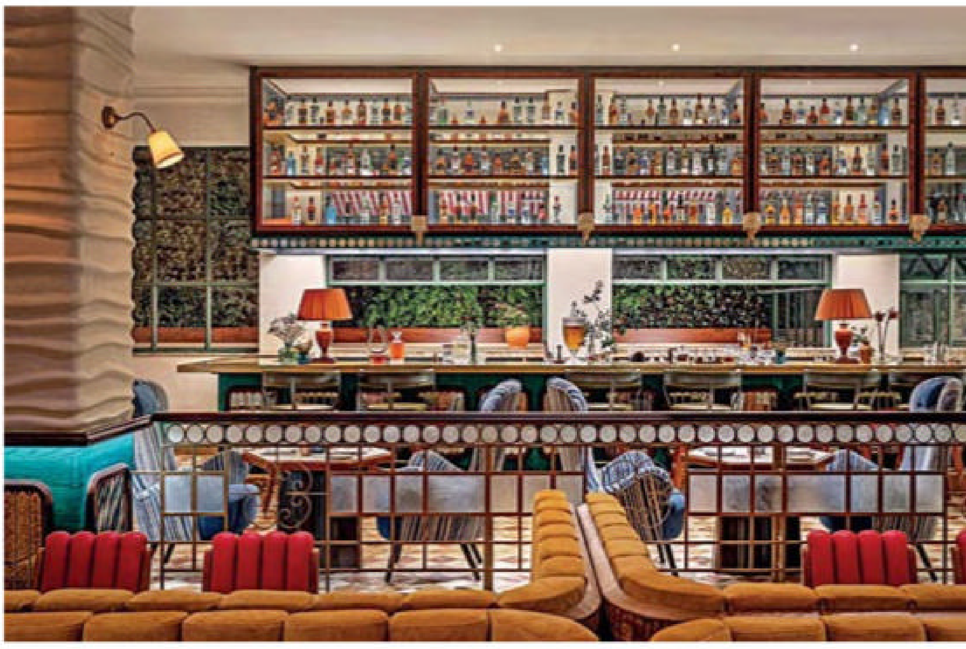
LUPA is an ode to Manu Chandra's many passions—travel, design, history, architecture and of course, food. You walk in expecting a warm Italian cottage but instead find a modern, maximalist space with oversized lamps, brass accents, leather couches, grand staircases and a flaming orange mural of the inspiration behind the name, the mythical she-wolf Lupa herself. And the crux of LUPA lies in this audacity—what else can you call a restaurant that houses an underground stone clad wine cellar with over 2,000 world class wines in the centre of an Indian metropolis?

LUPA is not just about audacity and ambition. The menu is rooted in timeless European flavours and modern techniques, and the bar offers interesting takes on the classics with innovative house distills. The salami platter with exquisite cold cuts like salami milano, black forest ham, and edel salami piccante, house made tigelle buns,gnocchi frittos, gherkins and a spicy mostarda, is light yet flavourful and sets the tone for the meal. Portobello Mushroom Pithivier and Pressed Half Brick Chicken are mains with hearty comforting flavours. The courses are best paired with house cocktails like Lupa-tini, a take on the classic martini that comes with a smoke bubble, Shrub G&T with gondhoraj lemon and notes of ginger and lavender, and the innovative Melon Cheese and Ham made with vermouth, gin, cheese (yes!) and served with a ham chip!

To close the night, choose The Notorious F.I.G, a layered cocktail of fig preserve infused bourbon, Campari, lime, bitters, thyme, and cinnamon, which is but a metaphor of the many facets of LUPA. The flavours of both, the cocktail and the restaurant, are sure to linger on your palate and heart for long.

Where Ground Floor, Spencer's Towers, No. 86, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bangalore; +91 8792384999 / +91 8792385999

Cost ₹4,500 (Meal for two) plus taxes



* **INDULGENCE EQUALS IMAGINATION** LUPA offers a blend of classic and novel, where hearty mains and desserts sit next to innovative entrees and cocktails.

SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE: T3.0 litre V6 turbocharged petrol

POWER: 400bhp at 5500rpm

0 TO 100 KM/HR: 5.7 sec

TRANSMISSION: 8 speed automatic, 4WD

PRICE: ₹1.94 crore

SPORTING STYLE

The level of comfort and technology offered by the Range Rover Sport goes beyond mere good looks. This capable SUV can take on challenging terrains, while also providing a level of tranquility that few can match.

By **DHIRAM SHAH**

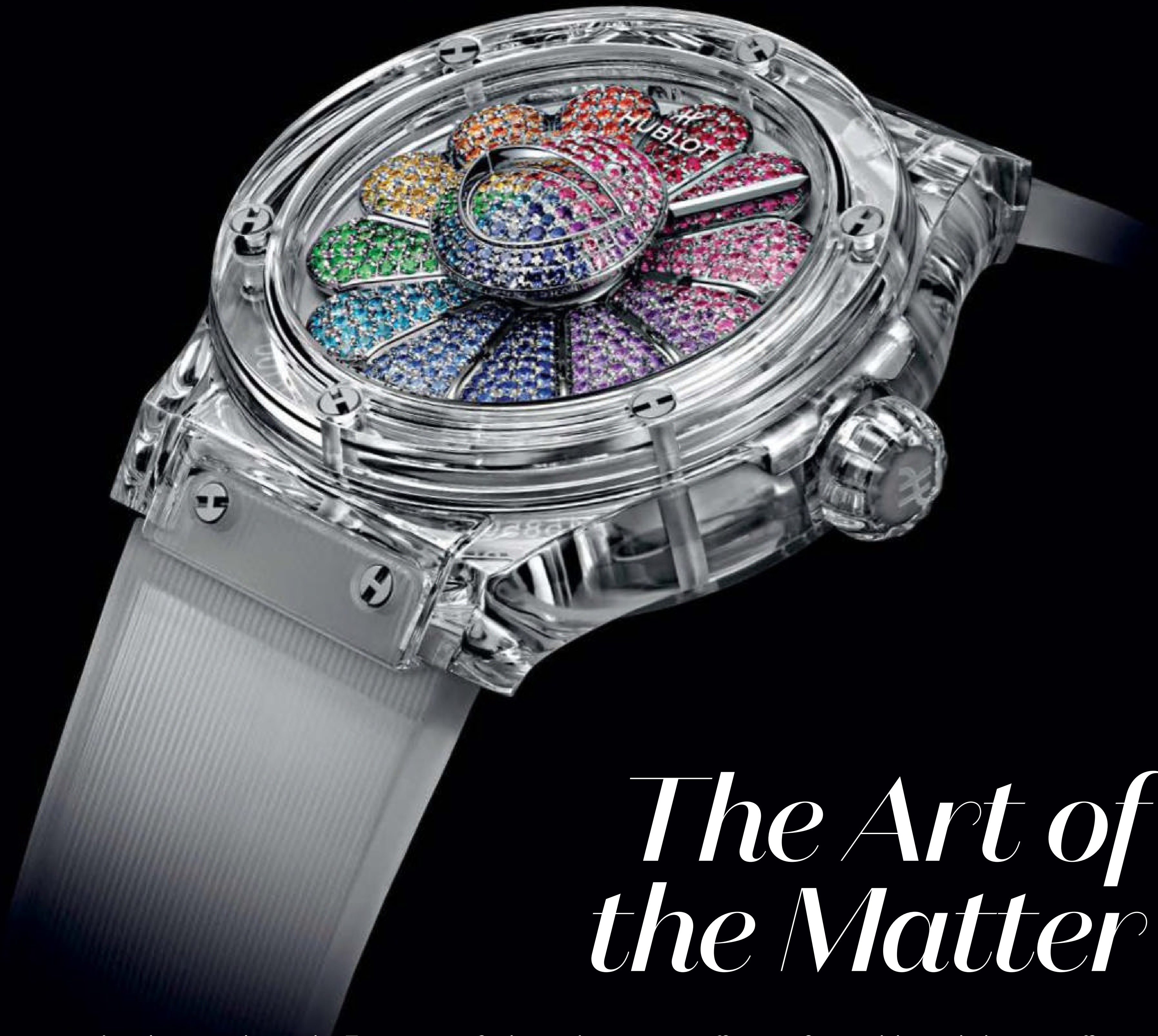
True style never shouts. This could very well have been the guiding mantra for the new Range Rover Sport that has now entered its third generation. Minimalism is the big statement here. Even though it is bigger and more spacious; it is hands down the best looking iteration of the SUV thus far. The sculpted, or should I say, chiselled exterior combined with the stealth-like front grille and subtle curves gives it an imposing road presence. These design cues are echoed at the back and with absolute minimalism. All that is visible is the good stuff–large quad exhaust pipes, a thin black strip having the words 'Range Rover', which is flanked by slim LED tail lights

Brand new from the inside out, the interiors while remaining minimalistic exude a sense of luxury and space. All the materials used in the cabin are top notch; the leathers are thick, soft and incredibly plush. All the knobs are crafted from metal and offer a satisfying clicking feedback when turned. As a refreshing change along with craftsmanship, this Range Rover scores high on technology as well. At the centre of the dashboard is a 13.1-inch curved touchscreen that provides haptic feedback. Land Rover's latest Pivi Pro software powers the infotainment system. It lets you control everything from the navigation to media and vehicle settings; while the user does this the system learns about the user preferences and fine tunes itself to provide a personalised experience. Complimenting this is a 13.7-inch digital instrument cluster that sits behind the steering wheel. I found the system performance and graphics extremely intuitive. However, the system does take some time to get used to and navigating to deeper menus is still tricky when compared to the Mercedes' MBUX system.

Comfort Zone

Calling the 22-way adjustable heated/ cooled massaging seats comfortable would be a gross understatement. Making the ride even more pleasant in our polluted cities is Cabin Air Purification Pro that combines PM2.5 filtration and a proprietary technology that reduces odors and allergens. Making the already silent cabin even more quiet is active noise cancellation technology that effectively reduces most of the cabin and tire noise entering the cabin.

Under the hood of our tester was a 3.0-litre inline-6 mild-hybrid petrol engine that churns out 400 hp and 550 nM of torque. Mated to an 8 speed automatic ZF gearbox it can take the 2.3 tonne SUV from a standstill to 100 km/hr in a claimed 5.7 seconds. Unlike its earlier sibling, this one provided an engaging drive at lower speeds, which made navigating this behemoth in the maddening Mumbai traffic a breeze. With Dynamic Air Suspension, the city's infamous potholes felt no more than minor bumps, in the cabin. At higher speeds and on winding roads outside the city, I was impressed with the way the Rover took on corners. Helping me take on other enthusiastic drivers in cars a third the size of my SUV was roll control technology that uses 48-volt electrical system to activate the anti-roll bars electronically. On highways, the ride was pillow soft; that, along with the massaging seats makes this SUV a rather comfortable long drive machine. Hit the road Jack!



The Art of the Matter

Almost as whimsical as Takashi Murakami's prose, the second collaborative watch from Hublot and the Japanese artist uses the smiling flower as both muse and theme. This is a recurrent icon of Murakami's work, and in the case of this watch, transforms it into a whirlwind of transparency and colour. The Classic Fusion Takashi Murakami Sapphire Rainbow is an artifact for all practical purposes!

While the first timepiece was an all black watch, this new rendition is a riot of colour with transparent effects. The technicians in Hublot's workshops have created a unique setting with this new work of art–a transparent background through which we can ascertain both the artist's work and the intricate mechanics of the watchmakers in Nyon.

The smiling flower offers a mischievous smile on a three-dimensional face that literally pops out from the watch dial, extending out beyond the sapphire crystal. Twelve colourful petals rotate around this face, and their polychromatic effect has been achieved by setting 487 stones representing the colours of the rainbow: rubies, pink sapphires, amethysts, blue sapphires, tsavorites, yellow and orange sapphires. Owing to an ingenious ball-bearing system developed by Hublot's engineers, the petals start turning under the watch crystal and bring Murakami's smiling flower to life.

Price on request; Availability Limited edition of 100 numbered pieces.

–By Chumki Bharadwaj

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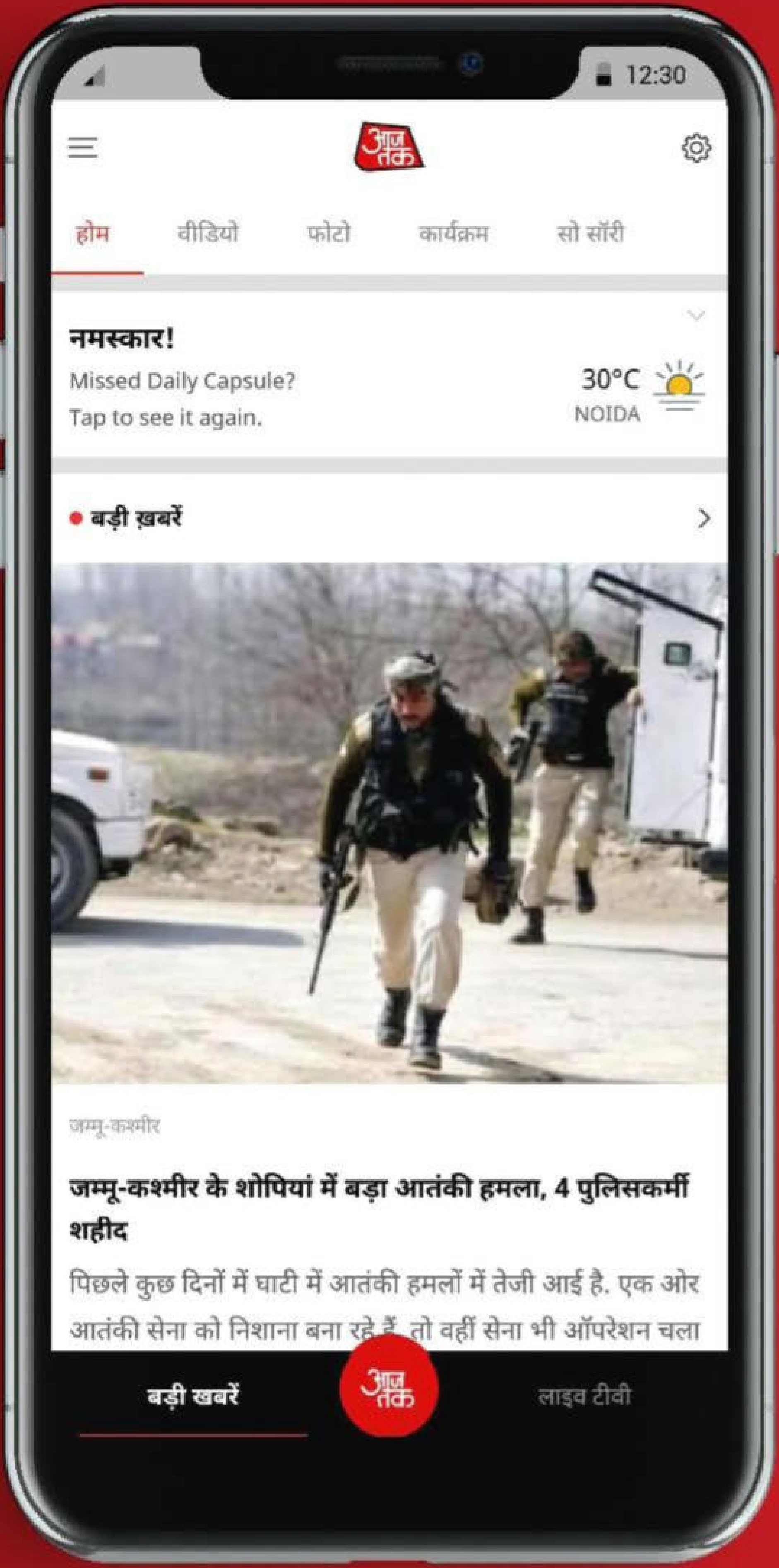
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जम्मू-कश्मीर

जम्मू-कश्मीर के शोपियां में बड़ा आतंकी हमला, 4 पुलिसकर्मी शहीद

पिछले कुछ दिनों में घाटी में आतंकी हमलों में तेजी आई है. एक ओर आतंकी सेना को निशाना बना रहे हैं, तो वहीं सेना भी ऑपरेशन चला